



WHAT DID YOU JUST NOT SAY?

Learning to understand and use the subtle effectiveness of nonverbal communication can make the difference between a good teacher – and a truly memorable one, suggest John White and John Gardner...

Think about your own days in school. You can probably recall a teacher whose lessons you particularly enjoyed – who managed to capture your attention and spark your enthusiasm. How did she do it?

What special qualities did she have?

In modern parlance, we could call it 'the X-factor' – defined by the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary as 'a quality that you cannot describe which

makes someone very special'; and made more familiar as it relates to the eponymous UK musical talent contest. And just as talent is not the exclusive requirement of the X-Factor contestant, subject knowledge

and teaching ability are not exclusive requirements of the classroom X-factor. In our experience, the magnetic quality of the really inspiring teacher comes in subtle ways: how we 'carry ourselves' in the classroom,



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our body language, whether we smile or grimace, how we dress and gesture, and so on.

Academically, this collection of attributes is known as 'nonverbal communication' – and we think that for almost all of us, it resembles the 'fish that doesn't know it's wet' phenomenon, which is why we wrote *The Classroom X-Factor*, giving insights into how it actually works. We talk about smiling (did you know that it can induce a positive biological reaction in the recipient?), body language, gestures, vocal expression, eye contact, occupation of space, facial expressions, classroom environments and colour. We also give insights into adding value to lesson content through

nonverbal means, conveying your emotions nonverbally and most importantly, how a developed X-Factor can improve the quality of learning in the classroom.

In the final section, we include five fictional stories (grounded in the key findings of the book and our own research) to provide 'live' insights into the classroom X-Factor in operation. One of these tales: 'The Butterfly', is reproduced here, along with the pointers showing the X-factor in play and an analysis discussing the key themes.



The Butterfly

He was in big trouble when she got home. Of that she was sure. How dare he call her mother an interfering cow? After ten years of marriage, two children and a wedding gift of 10,000 dollars – which, by the way, this interfering cow had given him – Mark Lermont was, it had to be said, an ignorant and ungrateful pig.

But first she had to do a spelling test with second grade. She just wasn't in the mood. Quarrelling before going to work was always a bad idea. Now she felt tired and distracted. There was also something about this room that really annoyed her; **was it the lack of light or the grey walls?** Anyway, she had to get on with it. She opened the book on page 14 of the level two phonics programme. Wow, she couldn't believe it. The first word in the list was pig.

'OK, children, your first word today is – pig.' **She spat the word out with as much contempt as possible.** Some of the innocent faces looked up at her in surprise. Then hands dived for the exercise books and the pupils scribbled busily. 'The next word is dig.'

Her mind trailed off. She remembered Mark's excitement the day they received the 10,000 dollars. He didn't notice any cow horns that day. Oh no. Her mum was a bovine beauty on that occasion, with not an interfering snort to be heard anywhere.

'Ms Lermont... what's the next word?' her daydreaming was interrupted. **'Twig', she responded, her voice weak, her eyes still staring at the small**

spellings book. And so, Martha Lermont went through every word in the 'ig' family. But her heart wasn't in it. **Her movements felt heavy.** Usually she would have had the pupils up out of their seats, **spelling the word pig, tracing it in the air, miming 'ig' words, and singing the rhymes.** She knew she had to get herself back in train.

Marcus put his hand up. 'Ms Lermont, my Dad said that I should bring in this fig leaf for our "ig" words table. I think we could use it for our drama too.'

Martha looked up and smiled. Marcus had this special ability to set things up. He had no real interest in the 'ig' table, nor was he interested in fig leaves, but boy did he love drama.

Yesterday she had read the pupils the story of the Hungry Caterpillar. **Martha could feel some excitement coming back in her voice.** Like Marcus, she too enjoyed drama. What the heck, let's have a go she thought. **The pupils sensed the change.**

She moved into the centre of the room, and squiggled around pretending to eat something.

'Children, I want you to pretend you're a little caterpillar. Caterpillars spend their days eating. Eat, eat, eat. Oh those lovely juicy bay leaves.' **Each time she used the word, eat, she gave it even more emphasis.** A funny word she thought. The children immediately jumped at the challenge. They were well used to drama and quickly mirrored Martha's movements.

'Now, I want you to feel very full. Oh, your tummy is so big. You have been eating non-stop for days.'

'Pauline, how do you feel?' asked Martha 'Miss, I feel very full... my tummy is really big.'

'Okay, children, you are all very full. You need to sleep for a while. But first you need to build a cocoon around you, just like the hungry caterpillar did yesterday.' Martha modelled how to build the cocoon. **She waved her hands, stood tall, bent low. She put on an excited expression. These actions seemed to lift her mood.** Once again, the children busied themselves.

'Now we are going to go for a long sleep. Everyone, get inside your cocoon and pretend you're sleeping.' **Just before Martha turned off the lights, she deliberately looked and smiled at Helena, the shy child who always gravitated to the corner of the room.** Helena always needed that extra reassurance. The class fell silent in the dimly lit room. All eyes were closed, a sense of peace reigned. Martha's voice broke the silence. **She whispered slowly.**

'Now, children, I want you to get up out of your seats. It's a beautiful day. Esther, switch on the lights, please.'

Martha stretched her arms above her head like a butterfly emerging from the chrysalis. She wiggled. She smiled. She looked around in awe. A newborn butterfly must experience such joy and amazement she thought. **She felt it inside.**

'Now, children, pretend you are wiggling free of your chrysalis. Stretch your arms. Smile at the world. It's a bright new day. How wonderful', she exclaimed. **The excitement and enthusiasm was back in her voice. She herself began to feel better inside.**

Yes, it was nice to be a butterfly. Her thoughts about pigs and mud were slipping away. Like a caterpillar, feasting on too much anger? Maybe she should remodel her own cocoon. Beauty can spring from ugliness.

Analysis: the X-factor in action

Martha arrived at school in a red mist. This was reflected in the silence of her thoughts, but became louder once she faced the class. Her poor use of eye contact and her snappy vocal expression leaked a lack of interest in her work. Her seated position and lacklustre efforts were in contrast to what the pupils would normally expect. She was not in a good mood and there was a listlessness about her.

In our own research we encountered the significance of 'teacher energy' and your X-Factor quite clearly. Nonverbal expressiveness is associated with terms such as enthusiasm, drive and energy. Martha's energy levels were at a low ebb at the start of the lesson.

Then Martha's mood changed. Instrumental in this was the direction the lesson took, moving from a spelling test to an exciting drama. The value of using your body and of using nonverbal gestures, facial expressions movements, etc, to represent and indeed instil emotions is clearly demonstrated. By stretching and smiling at the world, something stirred in the teacher. In this story, becoming a caterpillar, which weaves its own cocoon and stretches out as a joyous newborn butterfly, is represented powerfully nonverbally. Martha was also clever to connect such actions and her words with emotional meaning. We also see that the emotional contagion effect can work both ways. The teacher was infected by the enthusiasm of the pupils, and the pupils were infected by the enthusiasm of the teacher.

This story also illustrates the multiple use of nonverbal communication as an aid or tool in lesson delivery. There is vocal variety, variations in rate of speech, changes in teacher occupancy of space, differentiated use of eye contact and various uses of gesture. In our own research, there were numerous occasions where nonverbal communication was used as a 'tool'. For example, teachers commented on voice intonation. Gesture was used 'to provide visual expression... to create interest in lesson content'. Eye contact was noted by one teacher as 'a centrepiece of my work... closely linked with my hand movements... I use them as a tool together' (White, 2008, 104). Facial expressions were also used to convey enthusiasm, and interestingly for one teacher sometimes 'grossly exaggerated the verbal content'.

Questionable use of colour and attractiveness of the classroom.

Poor vocal expression

Weak use of voice intonation. Poor teacher immediacy and enthusiasm.

Use of gesture to assist memory processing.

Use of 'looking at students' and smiling.

Voice intonation conveys growing enthusiasm. Children are quick to detect happiness.

Emphasis on specific words.

Positive occupation of space. Use of nonverbal drama. Children use actions and movements to develop their understanding of the story.

Developing an emotional understanding of the content of the story.

Facial feedback theory – adopting a particular facial expression may stir the equivalent emotion within you.

Use of 'looking'. Directing gaze towards pupils in the corners of the room.

Varied vocal expression

Positive use of nonverbal drama and smiling.

Facial feedback theory – by adopting particular facial expressions we can stir their equivalent emotions.

Positive vocal expression.