

# Anonymous Communication Between Students and Teachers

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## Abstract

This research paper compares the use of traditional personal communication and anonymous communication and their use in an academic context. By researching several problems in today's teaching in universities, such as discrimination or prejudice against certain students, low classroom participation and the fear of asking questions in class, we argue that with the use of anonymous communication platforms, it is possible to alleviate these issues, and that anonymous communication has its place in a university setting when used in conjunction with traditional teaching techniques.

## 1 Introduction

Throughout the last few decades, advancements in digital technology have enabled us to discover new and effective ways of interpersonal communication and the exchange of information. Today, a significant part of social interactions happens without actual physical contact between the communicating parties, be it phone calls, social media messages or business emails. A particularly effective way of exchanging information is by using discussion forums, which allow multitudes of users to add their input and express their thoughts about topics they are interested in or passionate about, while maintaining an anonymous status in most cases.

At the time of writing, the world is dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, with many countries resorting to the use of social distancing strategies, which consist of minimizing the physical contact of people to the bare minimum possible. As a result of this, the majority of schools and businesses were closed down, and forced to replace the vast majority of physical interactions with digital ones, by way of the aforementioned social media, and other communication platforms, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet.

With most universities being used to distance teaching at this point in time, this paper will be taking core concepts from the above mentioned platforms, and researching the benefits of an alternate form of communication between teachers and students, that being

distance teaching with a degree of anonymity attached to it, and to see if it could help solve issues such as low classroom participation or discrimination on campus.

## 2 Traditional and Anonymous Communication Comparison and Their Uses

In this section, we will be looking at the main benefits and drawbacks of both specified types of communication and their uses in an academic setting, starting their definitions.

### 2.1 Definitions

- Traditional communication - All physical, face to face communication done under usual circumstances, such as when attending lectures or labs.
- Anonymous communication - Any communication in which at least one party's (usually the student's) identity is kept secret. We will also be considering it a subcategory of digital communication since it would not be possible to stay anonymous while maintaining physical contact in a teaching environment.

### 2.2 Traditional Communication

Being the most used form of communication in most facilities under normal circumstances, it is certainly the preferred way for most people. When considering the act of teaching as more than just passing information from teacher to a large number of students, there are aspects to traditional teaching that distance/anonymous teaching cannot replicate to a full extent. Those are mainly these three points:

- Body language, tone of voice and facial expressions
- Spontaneity
- Relationship building

#### 2.2.1 Body Language

Body language is a type of non-verbal communication, in which the communicants' physical signs and behavior are used to convey information. It includes behavior such as hand gestures, body posture, eye movements, tone of voice and many more factors. While it is an integral part of communication at large, most of it happens subconsciously. In teaching, body language is used to keep the passing of information during lectures engaging, such as hand gesturing when explaining a key fact or formula, or raising one's voice when warning students about routine mistakes and misconceptions. On the students' side, their body language and facial expressions can easily show their interest (or lack thereof) in a

given topic when speaking. It can just as easily expose their lack of knowledge, or their uncertainty about the correctness of their answer even before they start speaking. These unconscious signals can affect our conversations both positively and negatively, depending on the situation.

### **2.2.2 Spontaneity**

Spontaneity is an aspect of physical communication present because it happens “in real time”. Communicants respond in the moment, and usually do not get much time to think out their responses in order to keep the conversation flowing, unlike if they were, for example, writing an email. This makes physical conversations feel more genuine, as even a well-studied professor might have to take a few seconds to come up with a clear answer to an unexpected question.

### **2.2.3 Relationship Building**

Physical communication affects relationships between teachers and their students in a way that anonymous communication itself prevents. Seeing students regularly attend lectures and often ask questions may make the teacher remember their faces and see them in a favorable light, while disapproving of those who do not, or often cannot attend lectures or attend them irregularly. I see this as a negative effect, as it may lead to subjectivity in the assessment of the students by the teacher, in spite of their best efforts to remain objective [Bla02].

## **2.3 Anonymous Communication**

There are two main benefits that come from making communication between teachers and students anonymous:

- Masking of identity
- Academic objectivity/disinterest

### **2.3.1 Masking of Identity**

In anonymous communication, participants are not aware of each other’s identity. This includes the participant’s name, gender, age, appearance, nationality, social background, or even religious status. In traditional communication, most of this information is readily available, and even if it isn’t, it is not difficult to deduce much of it based on incomplete information. For example, just by learning someone’s name, one could easily guess a person’s gender or nationality. To this day, there are still investigations of issues in universities across the world regarding discrimination in the form of racism and sexism.

In this form of communication, on their side, the teacher would only see that the other participant is a student, without any of the above mentioned information attached. Even

though the majority of teachers strive to be as objective as possible when assessing their students, they are only human, and therefore are susceptible to irrational likes, dislikes, prejudices and biases towards some of these characteristics, even if they try their best to be fair to all students. While these traits are impossible to hide when partaking in traditional education, anonymous communication masks them, so that the teacher is forced to be impartial.

### **2.3.2 Academic Objectivity**

Another area in which anonymous communication helps is with the issue of academic objectivity. The basis of academic objectivity is that when communicating in an academic setting, the main emphasis should be on the information itself, while separating one's subjective opinions and experiences with the subject. If the goal of teaching is to strengthen the students' grasp of the taught disciplines, while keeping with the principles of academic objectivity, and letting the students form their own relationship with said subject, then the essential aspects of traditional communication, such as body language or tone of voice, may be considered unwanted, or actively detrimental to the objectivity of knowledge passing, as they are inherently subjective and often subconscious.

## **3 Encouraging Classroom Participation**

Classroom participation is an aspect of university courses, where students are encouraged to share their ideas and comments and partake in discussion with the lecturer. A study carried out in the University of Western Ontario in 1997 concluded that there is a significant correlation between the amount of participation done by a student and their resulting course grade. They also concluded that students on average rate courses actively promoting participation higher in terms of quality, motivation, time spent studying and amount learned, when compared to courses taught by lecturing alone.

The question that arises concerns the way of promoting class participation among students. Some teachers decide to incorporate participation into the course grade, incentivising students to speak up if they desire the highest grades. Others fall back on the method of cold calling, essentially asking the entire class a question, then choosing a student who has not volunteered to answer and directing the question at them. Both of these methods are functional but imperfect.

### **3.1 Rewarding Participation with Grades**

While rewarding students who actively prepare for lectures and answer questions is a valid strategy, it has its limitations. Firstly, because the teacher has a curriculum to follow, and needs to cover a certain amount of topics during the lecture, they often do not have enough time to let everyone talk, depending on the number of students in the class. While it is viable in classes containing few students, during lectures in large lecture halls with

several hundred students present, it is not possible to make time for a significant number of students to share their thoughts.

In situations where multiple students wish to get a chance to speak, the teacher often picks the one who raised their hand first. In this case, even if multiple people came prepared and know the correct answer, the ones who get to speak, and are subsequently rewarded, are quick thinking and confident students, as they are able to form their answer and raise their hand faster.

## **3.2 Cold Calling**

While studies have concluded that cold calling can be used to increase class participation among students, while not impacting overall comfort levels of students [DHP12], it does not change the fact that it is an involuntary form of participation that can make students uncomfortable and increase their anxiety in class, if not prepared and carried out properly.

## **3.3 Anonymous Communication Platforms**

By incorporating an anonymous platform for answering questions in class, and therefore alleviating the social anxiety of responding to questions in front of one's classmates, teachers may see an increase in classroom participation [Ray+] [FBG06].

# **4 Encouraging Students' Questions**

During lectures, teachers often take a break from explaining and ask students if they have any questions regarding the discussed topics. Many times, the students do not respond and so the teacher continues lecturing.

In an ideal world, this would mean that every student in the lecture hall has a perfect understanding of the subjects and needs no clarification. But this is most often not the case. One reason why a student might not be asking questions is that they did not sufficiently prepare for the lecture, or were not paying enough attention until then to formulate a meaningful question, though there are other reasons why students may feel apprehensive about asking questions in class.

## **4.1 Fear of Looking out of Place**

Even when students are constantly encouraged to ask questions by their teachers, they might feel anxious when unclear about topics they believe they should already know. They hesitate to ask for explanations regarding "trivial topics", because they fear being judged for not knowing, more often by their classmates and friends rather than the teacher. They then often fall further behind in their studies, since lectures tend to build upon knowledge learned in the past weeks.

## 4.2 Poor Communication Skills

Students with poor language or communication skills need more time and effort to formulate their thoughts into a well posed question than others. The timeframe offered by the teacher, which is usually around a few seconds, is not long enough for them. These students might prefer written anonymous communication, as it does not happen in real time and offers an opportunity to better formulate their thoughts, and edit or expand them before sending the question in. This, coupled with the lack of anxiety thanks to having their name hidden, would help them submit a better question. A question posed this way is more likely to be formulated correctly, with a clear focus on problematic aspects of the subject the student is unsure about, as opposed to a question posed hastily during a lecture. A more clearly posed question should yield a better answer, making the situation easier for both the student and the teacher.

## 5 Past Research

### 5.1 The Case for Electronic Response Systems

In 2005, a study was carried out at the University of Sydney [FBG06] in order to compare several ways of answering the teacher's questions during lectures. 135 students of an introductory management accounting course partook in this study, responding to multi-choice questions during the lectures throughout the course, and then being surveyed on their preferences. These four methods were being compared, ranging from full anonymity to no degree of anonymity:

- Using a keypad to submit their answer while remaining anonymous to their classmates
- Raising their hand when the teacher calls out the answer (a,b,c or d) they thought was right
- Raising their hand when they knew the answer and then explaining it
- Being selected at random to answer the question

In the survey, they were asked to rank these method in the order of their preference, giving them a score of 1 to 4, with lower scores meaning the method was more preferred. The preferred methods of communication were ranked as follows :

1. Using a keypad to submit their answer while remaining anonymous to their classmates (with a mean rank of 1.4)
2. Raising their hand when the teacher calls out the answer (a,b,c or d) they thought was right (with a mean rank of 2.3)
3. Raising their hand when they knew the answer and then explaining it (with a mean rank of 2.65)

4. Being selected at random to answer the question (with a mean rank of 3.66)

An interesting conclusion is that the ranking of the methods is directly related to the degree of anonymity they offer to the student, with the method affording the most anonymity being the most preferred.

In the survey, the students were also asked to rate several statements on a five-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The takeaways from the survey were as follows:

- students agree that non-assessable questions helped them learning
- students value anonymity to their professor slightly more than anonymity to their classmates
- anonymity is valued higher when students are unsure about the correct answer
- participation when using electronic devices (full anonymity) was much higher than when using the hand raising method (only slight anonymity)
- no significant difference in preference between first language English students and foreign students (contrary to what one might believe)

### 5.1.1 Results

The study found that students were more comfortable with an anonymous system for answering questions provided by the electronic response system, when compared with orally answering, and that the anonymity afforded by this system was critical in increasing student participation during lectures.

## 5.2 Anonymity and Classroom Participation

Another study carried out in 2014 [Ray+] using the Top Hat platform researched how different levels of anonymity correlated to the surveyed students’ willingness to participate in class discussion. There were 40 students participating in this study, with 3 degrees of anonymity being compared:

- Complete anonymity - unidentified to everyone
- Semi-anonymity - anonymous to classmates but not the professor
- No anonymity - everyone can see one’s identity

While the conclusion of this study was very similar to the above-mentioned study from 2005, with a clear relationship between active participation of students and higher degrees of anonymity, there are several interesting responses coming from surveyed students.

Interestingly, when asked the questions of whether it was important for teachers to know which students are participating in class, and whether they think teachers rewarded this participation, most students agreed. This is strange, because it shows that students are aware of the benefits associated with participating in class, yet from the other questions it is clear that they still often choose not to participate. It means that they are either not interested in being noticed and possibly given better marks, or that they recognize the benefits, but their fear and anxiety of public speaking is strong enough to keep them from discussing anyway, and therefore doing worse in their courses. It could be an argument for a lesser degree of anonymity, where the professor is aware of one's identity, while their classmates are not. For international students whose first language was not English, written anonymous communication helped increase participation because they felt it took away the stress of speaking in front of others and making mistakes.

## 6 Conclusion

Anonymous communication certainly has its uses in an academic setting, where it can help with issues such as possible discrimination, by masking students' identities when communicating with their teachers or peers, or low class participation, where anonymous communication alleviates the social pressure and anxiety when asking or responding to questions.

In spite of all the arguments advocating for anonymous communication in universities, it is not meant to, or able to, replace traditional education. It would instead be used in conjunction with traditional personal communication, and help support student-teacher communication where traditional teaching techniques have their shortcomings.

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