Connecting with your Audience

During a speech, communication is interactively occurring between the speaker and the audience. Not only is the speaker communicating their ideas to the audience, but the audience is interpreting the information and forming their own opinions. According to the text, *Public Speaking*, by Osborn, Osborn, and Osborn, immediacy is “the desire to communicate a closeness between speakers and listeners.” In other words, immediacy is used both verbally and nonverbally to reduce the distance between a speaker and the audience. Additionally, immediacy can make the speaker seem more likeable and more credible. Because of these relational and persuasive powers, finding ways to boost your immediacy behavior is very useful. Doing this might be easier than you think.

**Ways to Improve Verbal Immediacy:**

- **Call people by their names:** If you are familiar with the audience, especially in a smaller classroom setting, use audience members’ names while delivering your speech. This gives a personalized feel to what you are saying and shows the audience that you are interested in them as unique people, as opposed to making general, generic statements that you might make to strangers.

- **Use “us” and “we” statements:** Since one of your goals is to make yourself and your ideas more relatable to the audience, you should certainly use language that promotes an in-group feeling. By using terms like “us,” “we,” and “our” you are effectively telling the audience, “We are all in this together.” By implying that you are part of the group (class, workgroup, department, etc.), you have already helped yourself avoid the label of “outsider” or “other.” Conversely, over using words like “I” or “you” sets you apart from the group and thereby increases the distance between speaker and audience.

- **Use empathic language:** Speakers are real people with real feelings. However, speakers often deliver presentations which are void of references to feelings, emotions, or human compassion. Empathic language is talk that allows you to identify with the thoughts and feelings of your audience. Start small and try saying things like “We can work this out together,” or “We have been knocked down, but we will get back up.” Remember, a little empathic language can go a long way!

- **Use humor when appropriate:** It is important to realize that not all speakers, settings, or topics are suitable for the use of humor. However, many speakers are humorous and it can be very useful for boosting immediacy. It can also be a good way to displace some internal tension or anxiety. While humor can be a useful tool, be sure to carefully evaluate the appropriateness and quality of your humor. There are few things worse than telling a joke and having it fall flat. The silence that comes next is not only uncomfortable, but also counterproductive to your goal of appearing likeable and credible.
While these tips can be useful for improving your verbal immediacy, you should also consider ways to improve your nonverbal immediacy.

Ways to Improve Nonverbal Immediacy:

- **Maintain eye contact:** Making eye contact with your audience while speaking boosts your credibility by signaling honesty and making you seem more knowledgeable about the topic at hand. A lack of eye contact can be perceived as shy, uninterested, unknowledgeable, and/or unwilling to communicate. Remember, you would normally make eye contact during a conversation, so do it during a more formal talk.

- **Effectively use facial expressions:** Facial expressions should match the tone of voice and meaning of words being communicated. Think about it: if you are telling the audience something with the goal of getting them excited and ready to take action, you should sound and look excited. If your goal is to have your audience become concerned with a bad situation or social injustice, you should then sound and look concerned.

- **Effectively move your body:** To boost your immediacy try to move naturally. Don’t pace or sway, but turn your body during your presentation so that you are facing your entire audience one section at a time. If the physical setting allows, don’t be afraid to walk down the aisles into the audience. This can communicate your unity with the audience and demonstrate your confidence.

- **Effectively use gestures and appropriate touch:** Rare is the conversation that takes place without gestures or hand movement. “Talking with your hands” is a common behavior to see in most settings. In fact, a speech or presentation without the use of gestures would likely come across as awkward. For this reason, be sure to use gestures as needed and as they naturally happen. For example, if you are talking about movement, use your hands to show movement. If you are talking about something that is large, giant, or massive, use your hands to demonstrate those levels of size.

With immediacy behaviors you should stick to what you do naturally, and go for a more conversational style with your speech or presentation. This means that you will perform many of the behaviors that naturally occur during a typical conversation. By using your natural behaviors you will gain credibility and be more likeable to the audience. Both of these will help your speech be more of a success!