

Mechanisms of Persuasion in Didactical Communication

Cristina-Corina Bențea *

Rezumat: *Persuasiunea reprezintă o dimensiune esențială a oricărui tip de comunicare umană, fiind prezentă și în comunicarea didactică. O comunicare eficientă implică participarea unor mecanisme interne, psihologice și externe, situațional comunicational de persuasiune. Optimizarea comunicării didactice presupune cu necesitate controlul tuturor acestor factori și modalități prin care este indusă persuasiunea cu scopul de a stimula schimbarea atitudinilor și comportamentelor ineficiente ale elevilor și pentru realizarea achizițiilor cognitive, afectiv-motivaționale și comportamentale ale acestora în învățare. Lucrarea se centrează pe analiza diferitelor tipuri de mecanisme acțional-procesuale prin care se produce persuasiunea în relațiile de comunicare de tip didactic.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *comunicare didactică, persuasiune, manipulare, conflict sociocognitiv, învățare.*

Abstract: *The persuasion is an important aspect for every type of human communication and for didactical communication too. The effective communication implies the participation of some persuasive, manipulative and conflict elements. So, the performing of the communication is necessary determined by the control of the ways in which persuasion is induced and by the stimulation of the socio-cognitive conflict for the purpose to achieve the cognitive, affective, motivational, relationships and behavioral acquisitions in learning activity. In this paper is analyzed the different types of processual mechanisms of the persuasion in didactical communication*

Keywords: *didactical communication, persuasion, manipulation, socio-cognitive conflict, learning.*

1. Didactic communication and persuasion

The didactic communication is defined as a particular form of educational communication, “a communication tool directly involved in supporting a systematic process of learning” (L. Iacob, 1998, p. 190). According to the Dictionary of Pedagogy, didactic communication may be considered “an axiomatic principle of educational-instructional activity that involves an educational message issued on the subject of education (teacher), capable of causing reaction of the object formative education (student), evaluated in terms of external and internal feed-back” (S. Cristea, 2000). The didactic communication is the basis of the teaching-learning-assessment process, which takes place in an institutional (school, university) the between the partners with determined social statuses and roles (teachers - students).

The didactic communication has its peculiarities, determined by the institutional framework and by the teaching-learning instructional process, plus other features: it is bilateral and directed, it has purposes (educational goals and objectives) and an increased explanatory dimension (aimed at the understanding of knowledge), it is structured according to a pedagogical logic (aimed at the understanding of knowledge, not just their mere enunciation), it assumes an active role of the teacher (which selects, organizes, facilitates the understanding of scientific knowledge), is customized (depending on receiver), it is focused on the student (on the students' skills, needs, interests), it is evaluative and self evaluative (both in the case of the teacher and students), it is formative (the teacher simultaneously influences the contents and students), it is guided by rules and ritualized, it is dominated by verbal communication first and supported by teachers (60-70%) (Iacob, 1998, p. 234-236). Currently, the act of didactic communication is regarded as a unit of informational with the relational and pragmatic dimensions. In the didactic communication, teachers often appeal to persuasion.

By persuasion we mean the action of convincing someone to do or to choose one thing: it is a process of guiding people to adopt certain rational or less rational ideas, attitudes or actions (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). Persuasion is a “complex, continuous and interactive process in which the source and receiver are linked by verbal or nonverbal symbols and the source tries to influence the receiver (to persuade him) to adopt a change in its attitudes or behaviours, because the persuader had enlarged or changed perceptions” (O. Donnell and Kable, 1982, p. 9, *apud* A. Gavreliuc 2006, p. 196).

* Lecturer, PhD, “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati

Persuasion is a form of social influence by which people are convinced to adopt a certain type of thinking or attitude through techniques, such as rational or emotional ones. It can be understood as an argumentative way by which a person tries to persuade another person or group to believe or do something. Persuasion is a very broad concept, and the phrase “to be persuasive” may apply to all cases in which a change was achieved by using logical beliefs and arguments, but without using physical force. So, persuasion is based on discussions or on the attractiveness and strength of arguments, on how is the speaker able to sustain an idea. Persuasion does not contain any negative intent, but it is rather a transactional and mutually satisfactory act (Dillard and Pfau, 2002). Persuasion techniques are based on six human behavioural tendencies that lead to generating a positive response to a request from someone: reciprocity, consistency, social validation, assessment, authority and scarcity of resources (R. Cialdini). Persuasion involves the mechanisms of attitude change by moving from an idea of acceptance to its attitudinal change and then from changed attitudes to changed behaviour (J. N. Kapferer, 1990).

The changing of attitudes is an important goal in education, meaning that the teacher can use the persuasive didactic communication to achieve the desired students’ behaviour. These mechanisms of creating a change in attitudes can be used by teachers themselves, in order to change their behaviour in their relationships with the students. Any successful process of didactic communication should start with clarifying what teachers want to get from their students by trying to answer some important questions:

1. What do I get from my students?
2. What do I think my students will want from me?
3. What is the least that I will expect and accept from them?
4. What problems and difficulties might occur during my didactic communication?
5. How can I solve these problems with my students by communication?

This mental training can enable teachers to overcome difficulties and be more persuasive in their didactic communication.

2. Determinants and mechanisms of the persuasive didactic communication

By didactic communication, teachers try to be rightly understood by students, to persuade and to cause changes in students’ attitudes and behaviours. The persuasive communication student-teacher effectiveness depends on both the internal psychological mechanisms of the persuasion and external communication mechanisms, which are linked by a series of characteristics of the source, recipient and message.

Regarding the source, represented by the teacher's personality, it must satisfy two important conditions: 1. to have credibility, 2. to be authentic. *Credibility* refers to the prestige, authority, trust and value provided by the students of a teacher. To be credible, a teacher must have scientific and pedagogical competences, that is, to be well informed, to have the ability to formulate clear, coherent, comprehensible, accessible and empathetic knowledge and ideas. The teachers perceived as competent experts in a particular area have more credibility and they are listened to with great interest by students who accept their messages without much analysis (Maddux & Rogers, 1980; Heesacker et al., 1983 *apud* Dumitriu, 1998, p. 87). Such a professor’s idea can be learnt by the student, following a persuasive argument, namely that the authority had a crucial role. In the context of didactic communication the teaching authority argument is an important mechanism for achieving persuasion that causes teachers to impose their ideas in the mind of the student because they are considered an authority (“*magister dixit*”), which often determinates the student to accept a behavioural change because of so being asked by the teacher or so being stated in the manual or course and not because the requirement was justified or understood in its full validity and necessity. *Authenticity* relates to the teacher’s quality of being trustworthy, or the teacher’s ability of conveying what she knows in a sincere, genuine, accurate and unbiased manner, disregarding the personal interest or the gaining of some benefits, of impressing or changing the student’s attitudes and behaviours, at any cost.

Attractiveness is another aspect source whose effectiveness of persuasive communication depends on. In many cases of direct communication, the receivers observe and judge the appearance of the source to be pleasant or unpleasant, and form their impressions even before the source delivers the verbal messages (N. Stanton, 1995 *apud* Dumitriu, p. 88). In the case of didactic

communication, attractiveness refers to how the teachers appear to the students, how they behave and what they look like, i.e., their physical appearance, the way they dress, etc. By all these metacognitive elements students create their positive or negative image of their teachers. Similarity was also shown to be a factor of success in persuasion and people are more attracted to those who are similar, therefore, similarity and the pleasant physical appearance cause attraction which increases the impact of persuasive communication (Berscheid et al., 1971). There are some situations in which credibility, authority, competence and attractiveness of the source of persuasive message becomes even more important than the content of the transmitted information message.

An important role in persuasive communication is held by a number of *characteristics of the message*, such as the value and meaning of the message to recipients and its intriguing character which determines the changing attitudes of the interlocutors. Thus, an important message to recipients concerning their previous life and experiences will be listened to more carefully and analyzed more thoroughly. The experiments results show that, in different communication situations, the degree of personal involvement can change the students' attitudes, based either on source credibility or on the quality of arguments from the persuasive message. Students who believed that the teacher's proposal to give an exam would directly affect them personally paid more attention to the source than those who believed that the examination would not affect them personally and who paid more attention to the message than the source. Thus, the source credibility and quality of the speech had a different impact on students' attitudes which changed depending on their personal involvement (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981).

In didactic communication the argument of force is another mechanism of persuasion that makes students be forced to assume certain ideas, conduct or change their behaviours as a result of the induced fear of punishment. The teachers' threatening messages that induced fear and cause higher levels of anxiety in students hardly generated a major and sustainable attitudinal change because the subject tended to avoid the psychological feeling of discomfort and to leave the communication field (Janis & Feshbach, 1953).

Concerning the *didactic communication features*, such as the amount of information, the nature and impact of ideas, novelty, originality, accessibility and intelligibility, there are a number of questions which might arise. For example, should the teacher deliver long messages with many facts and examples, or short and focused messages? Is it compulsory for the teacher to provide more information than necessary or less? Should the teachers' messages be repeatable and predictable or should they be new and original? The answer depends on the complexity and difficulty of the informational content, the situational context, the features of the source and the students' cognitive ability to understand the message. Logical and psychologically well-based messages are more persuasive than the inconsistent ones and they have a greater impact on the students' capacities of learning and understanding. The message is more understandable and it increases both its impact and effectiveness. The intelligibility of a message depends on variables such as: length, banality /originality, difficulty in its cognitive comprehension and expectations of the receiver. The more loaded and complicated the message, the less intelligible and effective the communication. Therefore, additional, original and difficult information presented during the didactic communication must be judiciously dosed by the teacher and related to the students' intelligence, knowledge and understanding capacity. Finally, the emotional factors may increase the effectiveness of didactic communication, induce persuasion and increase the psychological wellbeing, the motivation for learning and changing attitudes to the students. Students may or may not agree to what the teacher said; this depends on the emotional feelings the teacher causes through the messages.

In a process of didactic communication, persuasion can be induced, distributed and controlled through the means of expression. The expressiveness of the language used in the teaching communication can create powerful, deep, and persistent effects on the receivers. Thus, the expressiveness of the communication may be emphasized by intonation, accent, pauses, rhythm, voice inflections, style figures, impressive the receptors. Besides paraverbal means of expression, the nonverbal means as mimicry and pantomime increase the strength of the teachers' message, generate emotions and feelings that can lead to the attitudinal changes expected. All these elements depend on the teaching communication style. For an effective communication process both teachers and students must to know the verbal and nonverbal messages codes and give them

the same meaning. Thus, appropriate encoding and decoding of the message are critical. As receptors of the teaching message the students think and understand its meanings and significance, analyze the advantages and disadvantages, anticipate the consequences, are careful, critical and selective, have favourable or unfavourable attitudes towards the message content, develop arguments and counterarguments, react differently to what the teacher said. Generally, students come to learn the content of a message if they have cognitive experience, intellectual skills, higher level of understanding, emotional availability and motivation for learning.

Researchers demonstrated that the receptors process messages differently. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), and the Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM), developed by Chaiken (1980), posits two mediational routes to persuasion, the central and peripheral (Axsom, Yates, & Chaiken, 1987). These models propose that when an individual's capacity and motivation are relatively high, the individual will carefully evaluate the available information, utilising the central or systemic route. In contrast, when capacity and motivations are low, an individual will process the information on a more common level, utilising the peripheral or heuristic route. In didactic communication, when students think carefully about the message content communicated by the teacher, they use a central route and are influenced by the strength and quality of arguments, or otherwise they use a peripheral route. Thus, the more cognitive engagement of student was, the more intense and internal processes were activated, the more persuasive effects of teaching message would be more sustainable. Also, for the persuasive teacher's message to exercise an influence the students have to know its content and be motivated to accept and understand it (Hovland et al., 1953). Mc Guire (1969, 1985) demonstrated that intelligent subjects are more able to learn and understand a message but they are less willing to change their attitudes or behaviour. In this case, the teacher should influence the subjective assessment for the purposes of understanding the utility and necessity of the change.

No matter how convincing a teacher could be there will always be students to ignore him, refuse or reject his ideas, and react to his communication with scepticism or displeasure for various reasons. These students are not willing to think and rationalize the teacher's communication, understand its meaning and value and prefer to evaluate it on the basis of superficial elements, because they use a peripheral route of communication and "simple heuristics" (Chaiken, 1980), and because they focus on the unimportant elements of the message (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984, 1986). Thus, if the teacher has a good reputation and speaks fluently, the students tend to believe that the teacher's message is correct. Also, in case of a longer message who contains more arguments or statistical data is increasing tendency to believe that the message is correct. In conclusion, it is good for teachers to provide students with comprehensible, well-structured and argued messages, without too many abstract concepts, new or contradictory information to make themselves correctly understood by their students.

When are concerned about the impact of communication, teachers must take into account the students' individual features, such as personality traits, intelligence, levels of expectation and aspiration, values, beliefs, motivations, thoughts, attitudes, and so on. Some of them are considered "anchors" of persuasion that can be used to induce new attitudinal or behavioural changes. The anchors are an important resource for change, because are perceived as important by receiver (Gavreliuc, 2006, p. 199). Thus, for well-informed and intelligent students is more appropriate to provide multiple arguments, and a single, but relevant message for the less intelligent and uninformed students. However, the teacher is more convincing when presenting both arguments and counterarguments, convergent and divergent information, and students have the opportunity to know different aspects of the facts and phenomena in question.

In his persuasive communication, the teacher cannot neglect his students' natural tendency to reject new scientific information, which they do not understand and to accept the information that confirms their own opinions, attitudes, habits and their often empirical life experience. Starting this, to determine changes in the students' behaviour, the teacher can make a reference to an effective and actual behaviour that can be stimulated in the future or can provide new behavioural models which students can acquire through observational learning (Bandura, 1986). Persuasion is achieved when a teacher shows to the student how to behave and, through positive motivation, challenges him to learn. If the student's responses are positively motivated by the teacher, the student develops a positive attitude towards what s/he has been taught.

The students' attitudes influence the degree of reception of the persuasive messages issued by the teacher. Thus, students with predominantly affective attitudes toward a discussion topic are more inclined to rational arguments, and those with predominantly cognitive attitudes are more

permissive to emotional arguments (Millar & Millar, 1996 *apud* Gavreliuc, 2006, p. 203). The students' beliefs have also an important role. Statements like "learn more from life than from books", "Internet helps me to enrich my knowledge and get better results", "the knowledge learned in school did not do anything" and so on are examples of the students' common beliefs. In order to influence the students, to make them change their old beliefs, attitudes and opinions and develop new beliefs, attitudes and behaviours or acquire new scientific knowledge, the teacher should develop his persuasive speech by building it on the students' existing beliefs, empirical knowledge and experience. People are hard to change their attitudes or behaviours, so he wants to change these should connect to something which the receiver is already anchored to, otherwise the effort to completely change behaviours, attitudes or beliefs are unrealistic.

Not all students are resistant to the teacher's persuasion tests, on the contrary, many will listen with interest and accept his ideas. Petty and Cacioppo (1984, 1986) demonstrated that some subjects may be more involved than others in analyzing a message, in using the central route depending on how developed their need for knowledge and the ability of cognitive effort are. The students with high cognitive motivation prefer difficult and complex messages, trying to analyze and seek solutions to problems, to differentiate between significant from insignificant information. The teacher must take account of all these aspects and provide consistent and well reasoned logical information to the students who have an increased need for knowledge (Cacioppo et al., 1983). Instead, students with a low cognitive motivation who are not willing to perform intellectual work and dislike cognitive activities are more influenced by the teacher's competence, by his physical appearance, by their classmates' reactions and attitudes to the teacher's message (Cacioppo and Petty, 1984). When the group of students react through a positive feedback, the teacher's message is more likely to be accepted, but when the others disagree, the message is more likely to be rejected (Axsom et al., 1987).

Also, our actions, behaviour and role expectations are conditioning the success of the didactic persuasive communication. The achievement of role behaviours has different and deep effects on the students' thinking, motivation, affectivity as well as on their personality. In a context of interaction through communication, people behave and react differently according to their beliefs, attitudes and expectations and to external social and situational influences.

References:

- Axsom, D., Yates, S., Chaiken, S., *Audience response as a heuristic cue in persuasion*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 53/1987, p. 30-40.
- Berscheid, E., Dion, K.K., Hatfield, W., Walster, G.W., *Physical attractiveness and dating choice: A test of a matching hypothesis*. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 7/ 1971, p. 173-189.
- Cacioppo, J. T., Petty, R. E., *The effects of involvement on responses to argument quantity and quality: Central and peripheral routes to persuasion*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46/1984, p. 69-81.
- Chaiken, S., *Heuristic versus systematic information processing and the use of source versus message cues in persuasion*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 39/1980, p. 752-756.
- Cristea, S., *Dicționar de termeni pedagogici*, EDP, București, 1998.
- Dillard, J., Pfau, M., *The persuasion handbook: Developments in theory and practice*, New York: Sage, 2002.
- Dumitriu, G., *Comunicare și învățare*, EDP, București, 1998.
- Gavreliuc, A., *De la relațiile interpersonale la comunicarea socială*, Polirom, Iași, 2006.
- Iacob, L., *Comunicarea didactică, în Psihopedagogie pentru examenele de definitivare și grade didactice*, Polirom, Iași, 1998.
- Janis, I. L.; Feshbach, S., *Effects of fear-arousing communications*. The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 48(1), 1953, p. 78-92.
- Hovland, C.I., Janis, I.L., Kelley, H.H., *Communication and persuasion in psychological studies of opinion change*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953.
- Kapferer, J. N., *Căile persuasiunii. Modul de influențare al comportamentelor prin comunicare și publicitate*, INI, București, 1990.
- Mc Guire, W.J., *Attitudes and attitude change*, in G. Lindzey, E. Aronson (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology*, vol. 2, pp. 233-246, New York: Random House, 1985.
- Mucchielli, A., *Arta de a comunica*, Polirom, Iași, 2005.
- Petty, R.E., Cacioppo, J.T., *Attitudes and persuasion: Classic and contemporary approaches*, Dubuque, I.A.: Brown, 1981.
- Petty, R.E., Cacioppo, J.T., *The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion*, in L. Berkovitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, vol. 19, pp. 123-205, New York: Academic Press, 1985.
- Petty, R.E., Cacioppo, J.T., *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*, New York: Springer Verlag, 1986.
- Roloff, M., Miller, G., *Persuasion: New Directions in Theory and Research*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, 1980.
- Sălăvăstru, D., *Psihologia educației*, Polirom, Iași, 2004.