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Keeping students engaged throughout a lecture: How to avoid premature packing away behaviours

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Abstract

This collaborative workshop critically examined a phenomenon that can occur at the end of university lectures. We were interested in cases where students begin to pack up their belongings before the lecturer has finished talking, which we labelled ‘premature packing away behaviour’ (PPAB). Such behaviour can impact student engagement in the lecture experience and can lead to frustration for lecturers and students alike. We shared our exploratory research into this phenomenon, which adopted the perspective of Conversation Analysis. In this view, certain actions of the lecturer can cue an upcoming closing of the encounter and consequently cue reciprocal pre-closing behavior from students in the form of PPAB. Further cues discussed included time cues, AV cues and individual differences. The workshop provided opportunities for participants to share their own views and reflections on the phenomenon and concluded with a clear outline for effective teaching practice into PPAB management.

Keywords: student engagement, lecture closings, conversation analysis, workshop

Introduction

Within the HE sector there is an increasing focus on the quality of teaching and the student experience. In this collaborative workshop we critically examined one aspect of the teaching and learning experience within lectures, which we labelled ‘premature packing away behaviour’ (PPAB). PPAB can be typically identified as the growing restlessness and chatter that can occur towards the end of a lecture, when students begin to pack away before the lecturer has finished talking. This phenomenon can lead to feelings of frustration and the perception of others’ rudeness amongst both lecturers and students. Students can also feel anxious about an inability to hear key information, especially if they are especially engaged and/or have hearing impairments.

This phenomenon was brought to the attention of psychology lecturers and researchers Rachel Bromnick and Ava Horowitz by Megan Kemp, an undergraduate psychology student interested in pedagogical issues.

Discussion Point

Workshop participants were encouraged to discuss and feedback on their own experience of PPAB, in particular, addressing the following questions: Have you ever experienced it? What do you think causes it? Who is being rude? Feedback on these discussions particularly highlighted the familiarity for all participants of this phenomenon.

PPAB in Research Context

We offered a perspective on PPAB that comes from Conversation Analysis (CA), an in-depth, empirical qualitative analysis of what happens when people talk to each other. One of CA's central ideas is that people actively produce the orderliness of conversation through what they do and what they do not do in a given interaction. CA views university lectures as an institutionalised interaction, which varies from natural conversation in routine ways that are attended to and made to happen by participants.

The particular focus for the workshop was on behaviour during the closing stages of university lectures. CA research has highlighted that ordinary conversations are actively and collaboratively brought to an end by interactants. Typically, this involves three stages (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973): a "closing implicative topic" is introduced; a pre-closing stage then follows, characterised by "passing turns", such as "Okay" – "okay", or "right" – "alright", by which all parties collaborate in forwarding the closing trajectory; finally, the closing proper is accomplished with elements such as "bye", "see you", etc.

Two examples of institutionalised interactions provide further insight. Research into medical encounters by Robinson (2001) identified that a "closing-relevant environment" was routinely accomplished via doctor activities such as filling out prescriptions or making future arrangements. These signal to patients that a closing is imminent and provide for their collaboration in such a trajectory. Meanwhile, Nielsen's (2013) research highlights two routine features of departmental business meetings: their tendency to have a formally designated duration; and the role of the chairperson, as the authorised "meeting closer". Two relevant upshots arise from these features. Firstly, actions can become time-relevant. Most notably, chairperson comments within a closing-relevant environment become concluding remarks – a routine pre-closing activity. The same comment elsewhere in the meeting would not signal closing. Secondly, whilst chairpersons are in charge of meeting closing, the remaining participants actively collaborate in closings, with one of their key pre-closing activities being displays of an eagerness to leave, such as shifting in their seats, packing up their belongings and even actually leaving the meeting.

Cheng (2012) sampled 56 university lectures and identified terminating behaviours which CA would designate as pre-closing and closing activities. Typical pre-closings included raising discussion issues, summarising lecture content, and explaining course-related matters, such as homework or exams. Meanwhile, closings were

routinely accomplished by explicitly declaring the end of class, dismissing attendees or apprising students about future classes. Notably, the incidence of closing activities was 90% but, of pre-closing behaviours, only 39%. As Cheng observed, this is despite all the best practice advice for HE teachers, which recommends that lectures conclude with summaries of content and/or opportunities for student questions.

These insights from CA and other related research inspired us to consider PPAB as an interactional phenomenon. In a small pilot study, we collected an audio-recording, the lecture slides and some additional ethnographic notes from eight lectures. Most were large lectures of over 200 students and all were within the discipline of psychology. Our main finding was, in keeping with Cheng (2012), that most of the sample of lectures involved no pre-closing activity. Typically, lecture content continued until an abrupt closing, such as “thank you” or “OK we are out of time”. Packing away behaviour overlapping such closings was non-disruptive, as raised noise levels co-occurred with no meaningful lecture content. Conversely, where pre-closing activity occurred, it triggered PPAB, such that next actions of the lecturer were obscured by raised noise levels in the auditorium.

Lessons

From these research examples and our own small pilot, we offered workshop attendees the following suggestions:

1. Expect PPAB: Lecturer pre-closing activity should be seen as a cue to students, who will typically display their reciprocal pre-closing activity – packing away.
2. PPAB avoidance: it appears that experienced lecturers, without explicitly recognising it, perhaps, have learned to avoid PPAB by avoiding the pre-closing activity that cues PPAB.
3. Lecturer behaviours are time-sensitive: as with departmental business meetings (Nielsen, 2013), certain behaviours occurring within a closing-relevant environment become pre-closing activities, and, as we are suggesting, become triggers to PPAB. The same activities may be placed elsewhere and will not trigger the PPAB phenomenon.

Discussion Point

Participants were then encouraged to share their own views and reflections on PPAB in an open discussion, which was engaged and thoughtful.

Conclusion

The workshop was brought to a close and participants were offered some hand-outs to take away with them (see Appendix).

References

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Appendix Contents

- Psychology Undergraduate Megan Kemp: What drew my attention to PPAB?
- Cues Associated with PPAB
- Top Tips and Suggestions for Handling PPAB
- Pilot Study Observation Sheet

Psychology Undergraduate Megan Kemp: What drew my attention to PPAB?

As a student I began noticing Premature Packing Away Behaviour (PPAB) in many of my lectures. On first thought, I found this behaviour to be rude on behalf of my peers and often refrained from packing away myself, even if I was unable to hear the lecturer speaking.

When I gave this behaviour more consideration, I noticed that my highly engaged peers were often frustrated by the inability to hear what the lecturer is saying and that this behaviour was particularly problematic for the hearing impaired students and those who were audio-taping the class.

Having spoken to my peers and looked at online forums I realised that this behaviour was more complicated than my initial thoughts. My peers were explaining that they pack away to prevent the lecturer overrunning by attempting to prompt to the lecturer that their timetabled 50 minutes was coming to an end. On reflection I could relate to this:

During my studies I had a particular lecture that would always overrun. This would not have usually bothered me but, each week, I had a timetabled seminar that followed my lecture. I was, each week, faced by the conundrum of appearing rude by either packing away early in my lecture or arriving late to my seminar. It was these types of circumstances that led to my interest in investigating this behaviour.

Bromnick, Horowitz & Kemp (2016)

Cues Associated with Premature Packing Away Behaviour (PPAB)

Time Cues

Time of day: The time of day should be considered as a cue to PPAB. The time can influence this behaviour in a number of ways: for example, if a lecture is just before lunch or at the end of the day then students may be more likely to attempt to inform the lecturer that the end of the lecture is approaching.

Cues in the lecture that indicate the time: There are often disruptions in a lecture, such as other students/staff arriving, that cue to the students that the lecture is coming to a close. In these instances, students often begin to pack away prematurely.

Time of lecture in relation to subsequent timetabled activity: Should students have another lecture to attend immediately after, they are often more time aware and are more likely to display PPAB in order to provide themselves with enough time to get to their next activity.

Slide Cues

Summary: A summary slide can be considered as a cue to the students that the lecture is coming to a close and can therefore elicit PPAB.

References & reading lists: In many disciplines, reference/reading lists are routinely displayed at the end of a lecture. Such routine placement can also cue lecture closing and, in turn elicit, PPAB.

Verbal Cues

“Next week...”: Verbally discussing ‘next week’ can cue PPAB. A mention of ‘next week’ can provide students with an indication that this week’s lecture is complete and can, in turn, prompt PPAB.

Introduction of another topic after concluding the lecture: Discussing or introducing another topic after concluding or using a terminal sequence can be disruptive to the lecture. These topics are often lost or unheard as packing away behaviour may have already begun after what was perceived as the final sequence.

Individual Differences

Students: Individual differences amongst students will influence their tendency to display PPAB. For example, smokers or those prone to boredom may be more likely to display PPAB. In contrast, highly engaged students &/or those high on empathy for the lecturer may be less likely to display PPAB.

Lecturers: In addition to their sensitivity to generic cues to lecture closings, students may learn to identify cues to lecture closings that are individual to particular lecturers. Thus, individual lecturer habits may produce more/less PPAB amongst their regular audiences.

See ‘Top tips and Suggestions’ handout for how to circumvent some of these issues

Our Top Tips and Suggestions

Here are our top tips & suggestions for how best to avoid eliciting &/or deal with Premature Packing Away Behaviour (PPAB).

Timing Issues

Avoid overrunning: Our top tip for avoiding PPAB is to routinely avoid overrunning your lectures. If students learn to trust that you will respect the official lecture length, PPAB becomes unlikely.

Time of lecture in relation to subsequent timetabled activity: We would suggest that reassurances that the lecture will finish on time should reduce/prevent PPAB.

Time of day: As lectures just before lunch or at the end of the day may increase PPAB, our suggestion would be to make reference to the time of day: e.g. "I'm aware that it is lunch time but I'll finish in time for you to get some food". Such reassurances should pre-empt attempts by students to communicate eagerness to leave via PPAB.

Structural Issues

Allow 'Wriggle Room' in your lecture: Consider including some lecture slides that can be discussed in varying depth. Alternatively, prepare slides that can be included or omitted as appropriate – using software technology so they only appear if used (obviously skipped slides tend to make students anxious). Both these methods allow you to check your time and make spontaneous decisions about how far to expand/elaborate on certain strategic slides.

Provide reassurances about timing: Showing you are aware of the timing of your lecture and are sensitive to students need/wish to leave on time can be very reassuring to students and can reduce/prevent PPAB. Consider engaging in obvious time-checking &/or using an alarm so as to reassure students that you will avoid overrunning.

Provide reassurances about structure: If students are aware of the structure of the lecture this can be reassuring. One cue that is particularly prone to produce anxiety about the lecture overrunning is uneven lecture parts. For example, if your lecture has one long and one short section, students may become nervous if time is almost up but only the first section has been covered. In such a case, pre-warning that the sections are uneven would be reassuring to students.

Summary slides: As summary slides can elicit PPAB, we've a few suggestions for handling this. You might choose to omit a summary slide. Alternatively, you might position the summary to come before the detailed information. Another alternative is to simply expect PPAB and manage it if it arises – a failure to quieten the room is more problematic than a swell of noise that gets politely and effectively quelled.

"Next week...": Consider discussing next week's activities at the beginning of the lecture, in order to avoid PPAB at the end of the lecture.

References & reading list slides: Should you wish to discuss/go through anything important on your list of references, we suggest that you do so at the beginning of your lecture. Alternatively, some lecturers use references/reading list slides to indicate that their lecture is at an end. Departments might wish to agree on the purpose of these types of slides. Alternatively, consider keeping the purpose of these slides consistent within your own lectures so that students know what to expect.

Introduction of another topic after concluding the lecture: In order to avoid PPAB in this instance, consider providing important information or announcements at the beginning of the lecture. Alternatively, expect PPAB from such activity and manage it appropriately.

PPAB Observations

Timetabled start time	
Actual start time	
Timetabled finish time	
Actual finish time	
PPAB?	
Title of corresponding slide: E.g. Summary slide or conclusion	
Any verbal or non-verbal cues noted? E.g. discussion of 'next week'	
Introduction of an unexpected topic?	
Lecture slides complete vs. Not complete?	
Reassurances used? E.g. time check/alarm, structure advice	