

***TEACHER IMMEDIACY BEHAVIOR:
STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION***

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INTRODUCTION

Is the teaching profession under siege? Are not the evaluators, funders, and beneficiaries of higher education continuing to shake their fingers at the teachers as the primary cause of dropping student performance? What, specifically, can be done in the classroom environment to address and respond to this criticism? The answer to this last question may be enhanced teacher immediacy.

Teacher behavior has been shown to affect the motivation and learning of students (Christophel, 1990). Over 800 articles in 20 leading journals have been published in the last two decades which relate positive verbal and nonverbal teaching behaviors to improved learning outcomes among students. Additionally, many of these same teaching behaviors increase student perceptions of effective teaching, as measured in student evaluations of instruction. Knowledge of course content is, of course, very important, but carefully controlled, empirical research published in leading communication journals (eg. Communication Education, Communication Quarterly, Communication Reports) offer evidence that student attitudes toward classroom environments, assignments, teachers and themselves, depend to a significant degree on immediacy.

IMMEDIACY THEORY

In Silent Messages, his seminal

examination of nonverbal communication, Albert Mehrabian defined the immediacy principle:

People are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer. (Mehrabian, 1971)

Using this approach-avoidance theory as an affect-based construct, teacher behaviors which demonstrate liking (immediacy) for students relate positively to learning outcomes.

Immediacy increases arousal and changes the academic atmosphere which heightens student motivation, responsiveness, and perceptions of teaching excellence (Allan & Shaw 1990). Which non-verbal behaviors make teachers more immediate? Smiles, praises, close proximity, high eye contact, first name familiarity, forward body lean, natural gestures, -- all convey greater immediacy, hence, greater concern and trust in the classroom. Using the Immediacy Behavior Scale developed by Gorham, Richmond and McCroskey in 1987 and 1988 (Figure 1) student observations of teacher behaviors have been correlated, using bivariate statistical analysis and multiple regression analysis. The results are compelling, especially in the six classroom dimensions addressed in this presentation: (1) teacher

and student perceptions of learning; (2) student motivation and learning outcomes; (3) response diversity in multi-cultural classes; (4) student resistance to task demands; (5) affective learning in divergent classes; and (6) the relationship of humor to immediacy and learning.

SIX IMMEDIACY STUDIES: A REVIEW

As noted, a wealth of research has established a number of diverse relationships between teachers' uses of immediacy behaviors and student affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning outcomes. Immediacy behaviors are categorized as low-inference, meaning actions which can be interpreted accurately, without ambiguity. Also, they are as easy to adopt as to smile or to stand closer to the students rather than behind a podium.

The summaries which follow illustrate methods which can move directly from journals to classrooms. The reviews are brief, presenting from each study only what was investigated and what the results indicate.

Study 1: Perceptions of Immediacy and Learning

Gorham and Zakahi (1990) investigated how students' perceptions of teachers' immediacy behaviors and of their own learning outcomes relate to teachers' perceptions of the same variables. They also questioned whether teachers can accurately monitor their own immediacy behaviors. Previous research (Richmond, Gorham, and McCroskey, 1987) had established the use of perception as an accurate tool to monitor immediacy and learning.

Methods in this study required

teachers and undergraduate students to complete a series of measures which combined immediacy and learning scales. Results showed that teachers are able to monitor their own immediacy behaviors; also, students' reports of teacher immediacy are significantly similar to teachers' self reports of those behaviors; and that teachers' perceptions agree with students' perceptions in all three learning categories. Another surprising result found no correlation between teacher immediacy and the degree to which a teacher enjoys teaching.

Study 2: Immediacy, Student Motivation, and Learning

Christophel (1990) sought to determine the relationships among student motivation, teacher immediacy, and student perceptions of the three categories of learning (affective, cognitive, and behavioral). She wished to find out how immediacy relates to student motivation and what would be their combined impact on learning outcomes. Methods included separating motivation into two types: trait and state. Trait describes the student's affirmative feeling toward learning in general, and state is the student's attitude toward a specific class. Christophel hypothesized that teacher immediacy could directly impact levels of learning by strengthening student motivation in a course.

Her results show a positive relationship between teacher immediacy and perceptions of student learning and student in-class (state) motivation. The latter also related strongly to perceptions of student learning. These results indicate that teachers can use immediacy to modify student motivation and increase learning at the college level.

Study 3: Immediacy and Perceived Learning the Multicultural Classroom

Recent studies investigating teacher immediacy behaviors and student learning outcomes in multicultural classrooms (Powell & Harville, 1990; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990) found a definite relationship between several teacher immediacy behaviors and White, Latino, Asian-American, and African-American undergraduates' perceptions of learning. These results illustrate that teacher immediacy is an important influence in multicultural classrooms, but the behaviors impact the students differently depending upon their cultural expectations. The researchers emphasize that "for all ethnic groups, positive correlations were obtained between immediacy and perceived cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning" (Sanders & Wiseman).

Another study (Collier and Powell, 1990) underscores the complexity of classroom systems composed of multicultural students. Their results show varied effects for students from different ethnic backgrounds as time passes in the course. They recommend further research focusing on the teaching process as it progresses over time. Discussion in both studies emphasizes the need for continued attention to the cultural differences in students' responses to immediacy behaviors.

Study 4: Immediacy and Student Resistance

For this study, students responded by indicating their likelihood of resisting teacher demands relating to such course tasks as coming to class prepared. Methods included the use of four scenarios: An immediate teacher and a nonimmediate

teacher using both prosocial and antisocial behavior alteration strategies. For example, the immediate teacher in the antisocial condition would admonish the student to come to class prepared "because I will lower your grade if you don't." In the prosocial condition, the direction would be, "Come prepared because you will find it a rewarding and meaningful experience."

Results confirmed that students were less likely to resist the immediate teacher who used antisocial techniques. In contrast, students reported greater resistance to a nonimmediate teacher using prosocial strategies. Kearney, Plax, Smith & Sorenson (1988) concluded that immediacy influences both strategy types, but "students may be more willing to comply with teachers they like as opposed to teachers they don't." Thus, a popular assumption becomes, through research, a conclusion supported by evidence.

Study 5: Immediacy and Learning in Divergent College Classes

The subject of scrutiny here is whether the correlations between teacher immediacy and positive feelings toward the teacher and the course (affective learning) would be as strong in a task-centered course such as accounting (T-type) as they are found to be in people-centered courses such as speech communication (P-type). Researchers (Kearney, Plax, & Wendt-Wasco, 1985) hypothesized that it may be mistaken to assume that teacher behaviors judged effective in one type of course would be similarly evaluated in a different type of course.

Although past research (Hager, 1974) had shown that students in T-type classes prefer teachers to be structured and

controlled, results in this study indicate that teacher immediacy influences affective learning outcomes in both P-type and T-type classes.

Study 6: The Relationship of Humor to Immediacy and Learning

Joan Gorham and Diane Christophel (1990) examined how teachers' uses of humor in the classroom relate to immediacy and learning. Humor, a verbal dimension, has been established in extensive previous research as a high impact immediacy behavior (Kane, 1977; Graham & Rubin, 1987). Gorham and Christophel recorded 206 observations by students of teachers' uses of "a sense of humor." These were analyzed and correlated with overall immediacy and perceived learning outcomes.

The results confirm that both the amount and the type of humor influence learning, but that some types of humor are viewed negatively. Also interesting, in contrast with previous results, were the indications that female teachers' uses of humor did not influence students to evaluate them negatively.

RESEARCH EFFICACY

In the complex interaction of classroom communication, isolating effective and ineffective teacher behaviors is difficult; tying those behaviors to student activity or attitudes requires carefully monitored conditions and sophisticated data analysis. Not surprisingly, partial replications within the six studies produced similar results.

Two-tailed tests of Pearson correlation provided strong (.58-.01) statistical support for the conclusions Gorham and Zakahi reached regarding self-perceptions and observation of teacher immediacy and student learning. While

similar correlational analyses produced most of the results for Christophel, Powel, Sanders, Collier and Kearney, multiple regression analysis added predictive data to each study encouraging realistic prescriptive classroom applications. A 2 x 2 analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) gave Kearney, et. al. their student "compliance-resistance" results using teacher immediacy/nonimmediacy and prosocial/antisocial behaviors. Conclusions reached in each of the cited studies rest firmly on correlations and regression results well above minimum levels of significance.

DISCUSSION

Current research affirms that teacher immediacy behavior does affect student performance positively. Students learn more, find lessons clearer and more worthy of remembering, put up less resistance to task compliance, and respond more collegially in the multi-cultural classroom with immediate, dynamic teachers. Seven behaviors in particular, have been found to produce these results, even in an ethnically mixed environment. They are:

1. Smiling and praising student work
2. Maintaining sustained eye contact
3. Shifting the proximity of self to students
4. Encouraging students to talk; soliciting viewpoints
5. Relaxing physically with an accompanying expressive voice
6. Using relevant humor and personal, positive disclosures
7. Recognizing students by first names or accomplishments

Professional rewards for immediate teaching include enhanced student and administrative evaluations of performance. Evaluation responses which address the classroom learning climate (teacher openness to questioning or disagreement; concern for student understanding; enthusiasm, and level of interest generated in the subject) are influenced by teacher immediacy. Supervisors are more impressed with teachers who are more immediate and perceive them as more effective (Allen and Shaw, 1990).

Communication research validates the relational interpretation of immediacy behaviors. Simply put, teachers can respond to society's criticism by exploiting the research findings that teacher immediacy and student affect have a substantial, positive association.

FIGURE 1

IMMEDIACY BEHAVIOR SCALE

For each item, circle the number 0-4 which indicates the behavior of the teacher in your class.

Scale: Never = 0 Rarely = 1 Occasionally = 2 Often = 3 Very Often = 4

Verbal Items:

1. Uses personal examples or talks about experiences she/he has had outside of class.
2. Asks questions or encourages students to talk.
3. Gets into discussions based on something a student brings up even when this doesn't seem to be part of his/her lecture plan.
4. Uses humor in class.
5. Addresses students by name.
6. Addresses me by name.
7. Gets into conversations with me before, after or outside of class.
8. Has initiated conversations with me before, after or outside of class.
9. Refers to class as "my class or what "I" am doing.*
10. Refers to class as "our" class or what "we" are doing.
11. Provides feedback on my individual work thorough comments on papers, oral discussions, etc.
12. Calls on students to answer questions even if they have not indicated that they want to talk.*
13. Asks how students feel about an assignment, due date or discussion topic.
14. Invites students to telephone or meet with him/her outside of class if they have questions or want to discuss something.
15. Asks questions that have specific, correct answers.*
16. Asks questions that solicit viewpoints or opinions.
17. Praises students' work, actions or comments.
18. Criticizes or points out faults in students' work, actions or comments.*
19. Will have discussion about things unrelated to class with individual students or with the class as a whole.
20. Is addressed by his/her first name by the students.

Nonverbal items:

21. Sits behind desk while teaching.*
22. Gestures while talking to the class.
23. Uses monotone/dull voice when talking to the class.*

24. Looks at the class while talking.
25. Smiles at the class while talking.
26. Has a very tense body position while talking to the class.*
27. Touches students in the class.
28. Moves around the classroom while teaching.
29. Sits on a desk or in a chair while teaching.*
30. Looks at board or notes while talking to the class.*
31. Stands behind podium or desk while teaching.*
32. Has a very relaxed body position while talking to the class.
33. Smiles at individual students in the class.
34. Uses a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class.

*Presumed to be nonimmediate verbal and nonverbal items.

(Christophel, 1990)

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