

The Influence of CAT and Self-Disclosure on the Classroom

Caroline I. Turk

University Honors Program, Kansas State University

COMM 499: Honors Project

Darren Epping-Fuentes

May 1, 2023

The Influence of CAT and Self-Disclosure on the Classroom

Classroom relational dynamics influence the ability to teach and learn effectively, making positive, meaningful relationships in the classroom crucial. Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) explores how communicative adjustments, or accommodations, “reflect and affect personal and social relationships” (Soliz et al., 2021, p. 130). Thus, implementing CAT in the classroom could result in greater effectiveness of teaching and learning. Because CAT is used to manage identity and relationships, it is also important to understand the results of communicating identity in the classroom. Communicating identity by self-disclosing can foster a connected classroom dynamic (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015), resulting in greater satisfaction with and appreciation of classroom relationships (Hosek, 2015). Because CAT, specifically accommodation behaviors and self-disclosure, influences academic performance and relational satisfaction, their usage in classrooms would bolster instructional communication.

To understand the influence of CAT and self-disclosure on the classroom, a thorough literature review examining research on CAT’s classroom influence will be conducted first. Then, the implementation of self-disclosure in the classroom will be analyzed. Together, these two parts will explain the importance of CAT and self-disclosure’s usage in classrooms to increase instructional effectiveness and build positive relationships.

Literature Review

CAT and Intergroup Communication

The way in which one communicates varies based on the receiver of their messages. This phenomenon is explained by CAT. Research on CAT is thorough in explaining its origins, importance, and relation to other communication concepts. This may be due to the breadth by

which this theory is experienced – communicative adjustments are normal. CAT explains that speakers adjust their communication for the sake of managing comprehension and/or social relationships (Soliz et al., 2021). In addition to its breadth of usage, CAT also supports a variety of other communication concepts, particularly intergroup dynamics. Authors of the theory explain that when group identity salience causes communication changes, it may be due to the speaker's desire to maintain social relationships (Hecht et al., 2005). Current research on instructional communication uses intergroup ideas in conjunction with CAT to explain the importance of accommodation, or communication adjustments, and propose how to implement it in the classroom (Soliz et al., 2021). The relationship between CAT and intergroup dynamics contributes to building relationships in instructional settings.

Classroom Relationships

The literature on classroom relationships as a source of support illuminates the importance of these positive relationships. Frisby and colleagues (2020) use relationships motivation theory to examine the correlation between students' interpersonal relationships with their college instructors and peers as potential sources of support, which fosters academic resilience and hope. It has been found that by using effective teaching measures, instructors have been able to meet “the basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relationships for students” (Frisby et al., 2020, p. 292), revealing the correlation and importance of accommodation in instruction. In another study by Frisby (2020), disclosure, appropriate humor, psychological and physical immediacy, emotional support, and confirmation were identified as effective teaching strategies for college instructors. While it is important for instructors to implement these, it has also been found that peers engaging in such measures bode similar results of a student experiencing positive relationships and support. Results show that a student viewing their

instructor and/or peers as a resource for support can fulfill psychological needs of relatedness, inspiring academic resilience and hope (Frisby et al., 2020). This research is incredibly valuable as it connects intergroup dynamics with instructional relationships to show why positive relationships in the classroom are essential to a student. They can influence one's entire academic and personal trajectory. However, research focuses on collegiate relationships. Some of the results of accommodation tactics may vary in non-collegiate age groups, like elementary-school ages, and should be further explored to best help students of all ages.

In addition to inspiring resilience and hope, Hosek (2015) found that positive relationships can help prevent intergroup biases and prejudices against outgroups. There is a lot of developmental research studying the age at which intergroup biases form. It has been found that young children can develop biases toward salient social groups by three years old and are greatly influenced by their authority figures' labels and environmental organization (Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Intergroup biases develop in children before they are old enough to begin elementary school, however, the next age group intergroup biases are thoroughly studied are young adults – college students. There is little academic support providing understanding and recommendations to some of the main influencers of children's biases – primary school teachers. The existing research lacks in providing support for this demographic and results in the mishandling of children's already developing biases. By understanding elementary school-aged children's intergroup biases, educators can guide, shape, and grow their students more effectively, ultimately helping to meet their academic and social needs to foster hope and resilience. In primary school especially, there are few answers for how instructor communication can be accommodated to the specific needs of this age group. To best help students and teachers, this gap in research needs to be filled.

Accommodation

The impacts of accommodation are evaluated through literature on CAT and instructional communication. There is enough research in this area to support the positive correlation between instructor accommodation and positive classroom outcomes clearly and repeatedly. When accommodation is used in the classroom, students benefit from its results.

Frey and Lane (2021) found that students' perceptions of their instructor and other classroom behaviors are valuable as they influence learning outcomes, including "classroom relationships, affect, and understanding" (p. 196). Using slang is another practical way for instructors to "positively affect students' affect for the instructor and course material" (Mazer & Hunt, 2008, p. 25). Additionally, using "examples to make course content relevant" or being "concerned about [student] success in the class" (Frey & Lane, 2021, p. 237) are more practical ways instructors can accommodate their students; the students' experiences and needs – both always changing – are being considered in the way in which their instructor communicates. Accommodation pushes the instructor beyond the lesson plans toward thinking critically about how they can meet the specific needs of their dynamic students. Thanks to its breadth of study, researchers have been able to repeatedly prove that accommodation is an effective classroom tool.

While accommodation can benefit students, instructors risk either over or under-accommodating to their students, called non-accommodation (Soliz et al., 2021). When testing for results of non-accommodation, researchers have found that "misunderstandings, negative perceptions, . . . lessened comprehension" (Frey & Lane, 2021, p. 196), unprofessionalism (Mazer & Hunt, 2008, p. 26) or other forms of perceived dissimilarities due to non-accommodation can occur, producing the opposite classroom outcome results listed previously

negative classroom outcomes. These negative classroom outcomes are undesirable as they push students away and diminish positive relationships (Mazer & Hunt, 2008). The negative outcomes non-accommodation can bring has pushed researchers like Frey and Lane (2021) to Understanding this risk brings researchers to explore an underlying factor of (non)accommodation – communication competence.

Communication competence “comes from their ability to adapt (i.e., adjust) to the environment” (Frey & Lane, 2021, p. 197) and is valuable to assess when analyzing an instructor's (non)accommodation. Perceptions of instructor non-accommodation correlated with students feeling “the instructor was a less competent communicator” (Frey & Lane, 2021, p. 200), leading them to view their instructor as “less helpful, friendly, or intelligent” (Frey & Lane, 2021, p. 200). As a result, Frey & and Lane explain that students are less likely be committed to the class, inherently diminishing both academic and relational takeaways (2021).

As an addendum, Frey & and Lane (2021) recognize that accommodation is difficult to navigate and cannot be mastered. This makes non-accommodation common because it “is a personal, individualized experience; what constitutes an optimal level of adjustment should vary from student to student” (Frey & Lane, 2021, p. 201). It is impossible for an instructor to accommodate to completely and successfully to one student completely and successfully, nevertheless to a roomful. By acknowledging this limitation, researchers release instructors from possible pressure to achieve accommodation with each of their students.

Accommodation is individual because it is based on the specific needs of the student. For example, students with learning disabilities (SWLDs) have very specific needs due to experiencing “glitches in processing information which may cause a variety of academic difficulties” (Cornett-DeVito & Worley, 2005, p. 316). Generally, most students “*want*

responsive, warm, flexible, excellent teachers,” while SWLDs *need* these teachers to be successful (Cornett-DeVito & Worley, 2005, p. 329). This adds even more importance to appropriate accommodation in the classroom. This niche subset of research is important to instructors who are accommodating specifically to SWLDs, but also to instructors who are accommodating to any student with a need. A student may not have a diagnosed learning disability to experience occasional glitches or lapses in the processing of certain information, impacting learning. The accommodation suggestions in this specific area of study are immensely valuable due to their unforeseen breadth of application. For example, researched accommodative suggestions for SWLDs include:

stating learning objectives; visually listing and vocally emphasizing the main points of the lesson; adjusting speech rate and volume during lectures for ease of listening; permitting SWLDs to use tape recorders in class; using multi-sensory techniques in teaching . . . (Cornett-DeVito & Worley, 2005, p. 316).

These suggestions could easily benefit any student and are exclusively academic suggestions; other, more social-focused suggestions could be implemented as well, such as using slang (Mazer & Hunt, 2008), using relevant examples (Frey & Lane, 2021), and appropriately self-disclosing (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015). Understanding specific needs allows instructors to successfully accommodate their students’ needs.

Despite research showing the importance of accommodation in the classroom, very little research focuses specifically on the types of students that must have certain needs met to succeed in the classroom. Even less connects these needs with CAT, leaving specific student needs, such as learning disabilities, and practical ways for teachers to accommodate to them under-discussed.

Self-Disclosure

Perhaps the most consistent recommendation through CAT and instructional communication research is for self-disclosure to be used to foster a positive classroom experience. Using self-disclosure to manage relationships is common in communication studies literature, so applying it to instructional communication is sensible.

Self-disclosure establishes connectedness by giving individuals ways to relate with each other. When a classroom is connected, the members within it perceive it as “an open, supportive, and cooperative communication environment” (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015, p. 156). Classroom connectedness is mainly created by the students, despite some help from their teacher. Teachers can put practices in place to promote students to foster this connectedness, like modeling self-disclosure themselves. By sharing parts of themselves, their students can relate and put themselves in an in-group with their teacher. As a result, “perceptions of shared attitudes, backgrounds, and social identities collectively promote[s] feelings of satisfaction and appreciation within the student-teacher relationship” (Hosek, 2015, pp. 187-188). This positive relationship drives students to seek similar in-group identities and relationships with their peers. When students perceive their peers’ self-disclosure as “frequent and relevant, they also report higher levels of connectedness” (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015, p. 164). Appropriate, or positive and relevant, self-disclosure in the classroom is a powerful way to create a positive classroom experience (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015). In most American elementary schools, students are with the same classroom teacher and set of peers for the length of a school year; the importance and opportunity to implement this accommodation tactic to establish classroom connectedness is substantial.

Little research has gone into analyzing self-disclosure by teachers and students in elementary school classrooms. Instead, research like Johnson and LaBelle’s (2015) focuses on collegiate professors self-disclosing to students. Johnson and LaBelle (2015) realize that

student-to-student communication is understudied in the classroom, but the expressed awareness that the application of relevant instructional communication concepts to elementary-aged students is understudied is few. There is a need for additional research to explore self-disclosure both between students and in the elementary age-group.

Analysis

Because both teachers and students can utilize this strategy, self-disclosure is a practical way to implement CAT and manage relationships. When done well, classroom connectedness grows (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015) and the opportunity for academic success increases (Frisby et al., 2020). To yield these results, educators and students should understand how self-disclosure influences classroom relationships and academic success. Additionally, Johnson and LaBelle (2015) say that self-disclosure is most effective when it is frequent and relevant. Understanding what constitutes frequent and relevant disclosure will help teachers and students engage in self-disclosure more effectively, thus bolstering results. To ensure positive classroom relationships and academic outcomes, self-disclosure should be understood by teachers and students.

Self-disclosing reveals which in-groups an individual is part of. The intergroup perspective in communication examines how group-based categorization influences satisfaction and affect (Hosek, 2015). To explain how self-disclosure results in perceived in and out-groups, Hosek (2015) breaks down group-based categorizations into three parts: attitude homophily, background homophily, and global shared social identity (GSSI). Attitude homophily occurs when, for example, a student believes they share the same values as their teacher. Background homophily occurs when, for example, a student thinks their teacher comes from a similar economic background. GSSI relates to an overall perception of belonging to similar or different social groups. For example, A high school student may feel they belong to a similar social group

as their college-aged student teacher, whereas an elementary school student may feel they belong to a different social group than their retirement-age teacher.

Each of these three concepts can function as indicators of shared social identities, influencing intergroup dynamics and affect. By self-disclosing, teachers and students can recognize these types of shared in-groups, which “promot[e] feelings of satisfaction and appreciation with the student-teacher relationship (Hosek, 2015, pp. 187-188). Such feelings promote classroom connectedness, which relates to “the perception of an open, supportive, and cooperative communication environment among students” (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015, p. 156). Because this connectedness is perceived among teachers and students, both have a role in disclosing and establishing positive classroom relationships, especially peers with each other (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015). Finding out one shares an in-group with another through self-disclosure, a student may experience a shared homophily and/or GSSI with their peer(s), boosting feelings of being understood and supported in their classroom. This fosters relationships, helping to meet their social needs and establishing a positive perception of their classroom environment (Frisby et al., 2020). These positive relational results, in turn, influence academic results.

The relation between positive relationships and academic results is understood through human behavior and motivation. Frisby and colleagues (2020) explain that there are three basic psychological needs that drive human behavior and motivation: autonomy – feeling free from intrusion, competence – feeling capable in the given context, and relatedness – feeling a sense of belonging (Frisby et al., 2020). Relatedness is particularly important, as relationships motivation theory argues that “social relationships are the key to well-being and adjustment,” also providing the most powerful leverage for intrusions on one’s motivations, thoughts, and behaviors (Frisby

et al., 2020, p. 291). When these needs are not being met, energy and resources go to try fulfilling them, taking away from accomplishing other tasks. As this redirection happens “to combat the denial of psychological needs, [students] often reduce efforts to achieve academically” (Frisby et al., 2020, p. 291). When these needs are being met, however, students are more “interested, engaged, have higher well-being, effort, and persistence” (Frisby et al., 2020, p. 291). Teachers and peers can help meet these needs through frequent and relevant (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015) self-disclosure, as it boosts belonging and feeling understood (Frisby et al., 2020). As a result, a struggling student can combat their unmet needs of autonomy or competence. Positive classroom relationships can powerfully influence a student’s relationship with themselves.

Discovering how to use relationships to help meet students’ needs also boosts students’ academic success. Johnson and LaBelle (2015) explain that students who feel connected to their peers are more likely to participate more, be more involved in class, and engage with their instructors. This stems from the feeling of classroom connectedness – the environment is safe, and the instructor is trustworthy enough for the students fully engage. As a result, students are more likely to ask questions, apply their learning, seek out instructor help, and even interact with peers outside of class (Frisby et al., 2020). Classroom connectedness being primarily established by students (Johnson & LaBelle, 2015) illustrates how vital of contributors they are to impacting the educational experiences of their peers through their own self-disclosure.

While much of self-disclosure and its relational and educational implications may come naturally, Johnson and LaBelle (2015) say that when self-disclosure is “frequent and relevant” (p. 164), it results in higher levels of connectedness. Frequency of self-disclosure relates to it occurring often in the classroom; however, researchers have not specified exactly how often this

is. This puts more focus on the relevancy of self-disclosure, which can help guide frequency. Johnson and LaBelle (2015) say that relevancy relates to one, particularly the teacher, self-disclosing when it relates to the topic and should include positive information. Self-disclosure that does not relate to course material may be perceived as out-of-place or inappropriate, making peers feel uncomfortable and less likely to disclose themselves. Teachers connecting their disclosures to course content, for example, is an appropriate way for them to disclose, in turn helping students to better understand both their teacher and the class content (Cayanus & Martin, 2008). This supports the recommendation that disclosure generally be positive. Like the discomfort caused by unrelated disclosure, repeated negative disclosure can make individuals uncomfortable, resulting in the one negatively disclosing to be viewed “less favorably than those who disclos[e] positive information” (Cayanus & Martin, 2008, p. 328). Relevant self-disclosure results in greater student participation, motives for communicating, course motivation, and a classroom view (Cayanus & Martin, 2008). Understanding the importance of relevant self-disclosure should prompt students and teachers to be mindful of what and when they choose to disclose.

Self-disclosure is a powerful tool that can radically impact one’s classroom experience. Understanding its relational and academic benefits should encourage teachers and students to implement it in their classrooms regularly. Additionally, it is also wise for teachers and students to consider the relatedness of their disclosure to the greater classroom conversation at hand to ensure the positive implication of growing classroom connectedness.

Conclusion

CAT influences the experiences of both teachers and students in the classroom setting. By accommodating, instructors can shape classroom relationships to be more positive and

engaging, even promoting closer peer-to-peer dynamics. This has a positive outcome for student academic and relational success.

The literature that applies CAT to instructional communication provides valuable support for the benefits of using accommodation in the classroom and strategies for how to practically implement CAT. However, a common theme throughout the research was its focus on college instructors and their students, leaving other educational contexts, specifically elementary ages, drastically understudied despite their importance. Elementary teachers and students are experiencing a disadvantage in having tools to foster meaningful classroom dynamics, which influences the ability to teach and learn effectively. Researchers should seek to conduct studies like the existing college-focused research among elementary schools so the students and teachers can experience the same benefits, recommendations, and results from using accommodation in the classroom, also adding more validity to the current findings. Accommodation is a valuable classroom tool and should be accessible for more teachers to understand and implement.

One practical way to implement CAT and manage classroom relationships is through frequent and relevant self-disclosure. Self-disclosure can greatly influence interpersonal classroom dynamics due to its revealing of in-groups and out-groups. When students discover they share in-groups with their peers and/or their teacher, connections grow. These connections help to establish the classroom as a safe place to belong, share, and learn. When a student feels a sense of belonging, they can better support themselves and their peers through adversity. Additionally, a sense of belonging establishes trust and a greater desire to press into what the class has to offer. Students may feel safer to ask questions, share ideas, and seek out teacher and/or peer support, yielding positive academic results. Self-disclosure may come naturally, but there is also opportunity to use it tactfully to sow greater results from classroom connectedness.

By choosing to self-disclose on a regular basis, students or teachers continuously establish the environment as trustworthy. Self-disclosing information that is relevant to the course or conversation is perceived as appropriate and maintains a comfortable atmosphere in which others are more likely to self-disclose. These tactful suggestions help ensure connectedness continues to grow rather than be diminished. By understanding how impactful self-disclosure is and how to best create this impact, teachers and students are more likely to experience positive classroom relationships and academic outcomes.

References

- Cayanus, J. L., & Martin, M. M. (2008, August). Teacher self-disclosure: Amount, relevance, and negativity. *Communication Quarterly*, *56*(3), 325-341. 10.1080/01463370802241492
- Cornett-DeVito, M. M., & Worley, D. W. (2005, October). A front row seat: A phenomenological investigation of learning disabilities. *Communication Education*, *54*(4), 312-333. 10.1080/03634520500442178
- Frey, T. K., & Lane, D. R. (2021). CAT in the classroom: A multilevel analysis of students' experiences with instructor nonaccommodation. *Communication Education*, *70*(3), 223-246. 10.1080/03634523.2021.1903521
- Frey, T. K., & Lane, D. R. (2021). Nonaccommodation and communication effectiveness: An application to instructional communication. *Communication Research Reports*, *38*(3), 195-205. 10.1080/08824096.2021.1922372
- Frisby, B. N., Hosek, A. M., & Beck, A. C. (2020). The role of classroom relationships as sources of academic resilience and hope. *Communication Quarterly*, *68*(3), 289-305.. 10.1080/01463373.2020.1779099
- Hecht, M. L., Jackson II, R. L., & Pitts, M. J. (2005). Culture: Intersections of intergroup and identity theories. In H. Giles & J. Harwood (Eds.), *Intergroup communication: Multiple perspectives* (42nd ed., p. 18). Peter Lang.
- Hosek, A. M. (2015, April-June). The intergroup perspective in the classroom: An examination of group-based categorization and relational outcomes between students and teachers. *Communication Research Reports*, *32*(2), 185-190. 10.1080/08824096.2015.1016146

- Johnson, Z. D., & Sara LaBelle. (2015, April). Examining the role of self-disclosure and connectedness in the process of instructional dissent: A test of the instructional beliefs model. *Communication Education*, 64(2), 154-170. 10.1080/03634523.2014.978800
- Mazer, J. P., & Hunt, S. K. (2008). “Cool” communication in the classroom: A preliminary examination of student perceptions of instructor use of positive slang. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 9(1), 20-28. 10.1080/17459430802400316
- Patterson, M. M., & Bigler, R. S. (2006, July-August). Preschool children’s attention to environmental messages about groups: Social categorization and the origins of intergroup bias. *Child Development*, 77(4), 847-860. 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2006.00906.x
- Soliz, J., Giles, H., & Gasiorek, J. (2021). Communication accommodation theory. In D. O. Braithwaite & P. Schrodt (Eds.), *Engaging theories in interpersonal communication* (3rd ed., pp. 130-142). Routledge. 10.4324/9781003195511