Instructional Immediacy Online

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Educators in both traditional and online learning events have consistently recognized a link between teachers who demonstrate warm, friendly behaviors and the creation of welcoming interactive learning environments. One critical instructional strategy that facilitates a sense of community and fosters a learning climate rich in social presence is immediacy. While teachers in face-to-face classrooms often demonstrate immediacy non-verbally through facial expressions and body language, teachers in online learning environments may be required to project immediacy exclusively through written messages.

THE CONSTRUCT OF IMMEDIACY

Immediacy is demonstrated through behaviors that express an emotional attachment or closeness to another person. The construct was originally developed by social psychologist Albert Mehrabian in the 1960s (Mehrabian, 1967; 1971; Wiener and Mehrabian, 1968). Immediacy is founded on the premise that individuals are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly and prefer. As an expression of affect, immediacy includes both verbal and non verbal behavioral cues. A "we" or "our" statement communicates immediacy while a "you" or "your" statement does not. Subtle variations in language indicate different degrees of separation or non-identity of speakers from the object of their communication.

IMMEDIACY IN EDUCATION

Adapting the construct of immediacy from communication theory to applications in higher education classrooms, Andersen (1979) introduced the idea of nonverbal instructional immediacy to college teaching. Andersen explained that immediacy is a nonverbal manifestation of high affect and is demonstrated through maintaining eye contact, leaning closer, touching, smiling, maintaining a relaxed body posture, and attending to voice inflection. Later, as summarized in Table 1, Gorham (1988) identified specific verbal expressions of instructional immediacy. Also, Christophel (1990) and Christophel and Gorham (1995) established that links exist among instructional immediacy, student motivation and affective learning.

Demonstrating instructional immediacy in online classroom environments is not straightforward. However, despite limited or absent non verbal visual cues, virtual teachers can still communicate likeability and a willingness to become affectively close to their students. While research studies in online learning may offer only moderate correlations between immediacy and cognitive learning, the experience of liking and feeling close to the instructor has been linked to positive effects in the classroom (Hess & Smythe, 2001). Correlations between immediacy and affective learning have been established (Baker, 2004). And, significant correlations between perceptions of the instructor's presence with both affective learning and with student learning satisfaction have also been established (Russo & Benson, 2005). These outcomes are consistent with findings on teacher immediacy literature in traditional classrooms and they underscore the role of the teacher in establishing an engaging climate in any learning environment. Translating verbally immediate behaviors from face to face classrooms to online learning events includes responding promptly and adapting Gorham's (1988) original suggestions (Arbaugh, 2001; Baker, 2004; Hutchins, 2003).

Table 1. Verbal expressions of instructional immediacy (Gorham, 1988)

• Use personal examples
• Engage in humor
• Ask questions
• Initiate conversations with students
• Address students by name
• Praise student work
• Encourage student expression of opinions

IMMEDIACY AND SOCIAL PRESENCE

Instructional immediacy impacts social presence, which in turn, can strengthen the sense of community within learning experiences. Social psychologists Short, Williams and Christie (1976) defined social presence as the degree of salience within interpersonal relationships in mediated communication. Salience implies feelings of presence, engagement, affection, inclusion, and involvement. In essence, an individual who demonstrates social presence in an online environment is one who is perceived by others as a "real person." Table 2 summarizes the bi-polar scales that Short and colleagues developed to measure social presence. A higher level of social presence online suggests that an individual consistently demonstrates attributes that are more sociable, more personal, more sensitive, and warmer.

According to Gunawardena (1995), immediacy increases social presence and thus enhances the degree to which a person is perceived as 'real'. Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2001) defined social presence as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry. Social presence has been found to be related to students' perceived learning and satisfaction (Gunawardena and Zittte, 1997; Richardson and Swan, 2003), persistence with their courses (Rovai, 2002), more complex discussion postings (Polhemus, Shih and Swan, 2001) and a significant factor in improving instructional effectiveness (Tu, 2002).

Social presence, with its underpinnings of immediacy, is considered a key element in establishing strong communities of inquiring and connected learners. In learning events where social presence is absent, participants may not feel comfortable and safe enough to express disagreement, share viewpoints, explore differences or even to accept support from their peers and teachers (Anderson, 2004; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer,2000).

DEMONSTRATING IMMEDIACY ONLINE

Exploring online students' perceptions of immediacy, Melrose and Bergeron (2006) identified how learners value instructional behaviors that model engaging and personal ways of connecting; that maintain collegial relationships; and that honor individual learning accomplishments. Table 3 summarizes specific strate-

Table 2. Measuring social presence online (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976)

• Sociable - unsociable
• Personal - impersonal
• Sensitive - insensitive
• Warm - cold

gies from this study that demonstrate instructional immediacy online.

CONCLUSION

Instructional immediacy online is the extent to which teachers are able to project an affect of warmth and likeability within their written communication. Instructors who demonstrate immediate behaviors such as those identified by Melrose and Bergeron (2006) can be expected to engage students individually and to strengthen social presence within learning communities. Understanding ways to translate traditional non verbal expressions of friendliness to online classrooms and continuing to seek out new approaches that demonstrate immediacy online is both a challenge and an opportunity for distance educators.

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