The Relationship Between Perceived Instructor Immediacy and Student Challenge Behavior

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The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between perceived instructor immediacy and student challenge behavior (i.e., procedural, evaluation, power play, practicality) in the college classroom. Participants were 403 students who listened to and reported on a 15 minute guest lecturer in an introductory communication class. Results indicated negative relationships between perceived instructor immediacy and all four types of challenge behavior. Future instructional research should examine instructor behaviors that deter objectionable student behavior.
Keywords: Immediacy, Challenge Behavior, Instructional Communication

Effective teaching is largely a function of communication behaviors that instructors employ in their classrooms. Instructional communication scholars overwhelmingly agree that immediacy is an effective behavior that instructors must consider and utilize (Richmond, Lane, & McCroskey, 2006). Although the effect of instructor immediacy on student attitudes is well-documented, less attention has been given to student behavior. As Simonds (1997, p. 482) explained, "little research has been done that deals directly with inappropriate behavior in the college classroom." Furthermore, Simonds (1997, p. 490) proposed that "teacher immediacy may influence the frequency of challenge behavior in the classroom." Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine this possibility; that instructor immediacy is related to student challenge behavior in the college classroom.

Immediacy in the Classroom

According to Mehrabian (1971, p.1), immediacy is when 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. Immediacy behaviors have been referred to as behaviors that reduce distance between people (Andersen, 1979).

Most of the research concerning immediacy in the instructional context has focused on teacher behaviors such as appropriate touch, eye contact, vocal expressiveness, forward leaning, and straight posture (Nussbaum, 1992; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987).

The bulk of research on instructor immediacy has investigated perceived immediacy with learning outcomes (i.e., affective learning and cognitive learning). Researchers have consistently reported positive linear relationships between teacher immediacy and affect toward the teacher and/or course (Andersen, 1979; Christophel, 1990; Comstock, Rowell, & Bowers, 1996; Gorham, 1988; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Richmond et al., 1987; Rodriguez, Plax, & Kearney; 1996; Witt & Wheeless, 2001). However, research on immediacy and cognitive learning has produced questionable findings. Student self-reports of learning and short-term recall have been linked to instructor immediacy (Kelly & Gorham, 1998; Rodriguez et al., 1996), but other studies have suggested there may be no causal link between immediacy and learning (Hess, Smythe, &

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Communication 451, 2001; Titsworth, 2001; Witt & Wheeless, 2001).

Although student learning has been examined, student communication behavior associated with instructor immediacy has received scant attention. Considering that immediate instructors are well-liked (Hackman & Walker, 1990; Moore, Masterson, Christophel, & Shea, 1996), immediacy behaviors may suppress undesired student communication in the classroom (Kearney, Plax, Sorensen, & Smith, 1988). One undesired student communication behavior is challenge behavior.

Student Challenge Behavior

Challenge behaviors are mediational strategies students use to seek clarification about classroom processes and to co-construct the culture of the classroom (Simonds, 1997). Simonds (1997) explained that these behaviors are frequently undesired by teachers and can be destructive. Simonds, Jones, and Bedore (1994) identified four types of challenge behavior. *Evaluation challenges* refer to students questioning the nature of testing procedures or grades received (e.g., begging for grades). *Procedural challenges* involve students testing the explicit and implicit rules and norms in the classroom (e.g., talking during class). *Power play challenges* are student attempts to influence the behavior of the teacher or other students in the class (e.g., challenging the teacher's expertise). *Practicality challenges* refer to students questioning the relevance of the course or certain tasks (e.g., questioning how content applies to real life).

Jones and Simonds (1994) discovered that the frequency challenge behaviors tend to increase throughout the semester. Additionally, both teacher power (i.e., referent, expert) and teacher clarity are related negatively to all four types of challenge behavior (Myers, 1999; Simonds, 1998; Simonds et al., 1994). Considering that students are less likely to resist immediate instructors (Kearney et

al., 1988) and instructor immediacy creates positive student affect toward the course and instructor (Witt & Wheeless, 2001), the following hypothesis is posited:

H: Perceived instructor immediacy will be correlated negatively with student evaluation, procedural, power play, and practicality challenges.

Method

Participants

Participants were 403 students (209 men, 191 women, 3 unreported) enrolled in one of three sections of an introductory communication course at a Mid-Atlantic University. This course meets once a week for 50 minutes. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 56 years ($M = 19.86$, $SD = 2.61$).

Procedures/Instrumentation

Students listened to a 15 minute lecture from a guest instructor at the beginning of class. After the lecture, students completed a survey assessing their perceptions of instructor immediacy and their likelihood of using challenge behaviors with that instructor. Participants completed a survey consisting of the Revised Nonverbal Immediacy Measure (McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, & Barraclough, 1995) and Critical Incidents Frequency Report (Simonds, 1997) in addition to demographic questions.

The *Revised Nonverbal Immediacy Measure* is 10 items and asks participants to report on the frequency of various behaviors used by their instructor. Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (0) *never* to (4) *very often*. Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .79 to .81 have been reported for the summed scale (Frymier & Houser, 1998; McCroskey, Valencic, & Richmond, 2004; Zhang, Oetzel, Gao, Wilcox, & Takai, 2007). In this study, the obtained Cronbach alpha was .79 ($M = 24.93$, $SD = 6.50$) for the summed scale.

The *Critical Incidents Frequency Report* is 20 items and asks participants to report

on the frequency of their use of four types of challenge behaviors. Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (0) *not at all* to (4) *very often*. This measure consists of four subscales that assess the frequency of procedural, evaluation, power play, and practicality challenges in the classroom. Previous reliability coefficients ranging from .65 to .93 have been reported for the four subscales (Myers, 1999; Simonds, 1997, 1998). In this study, obtained Cronbach alphas were .78 for procedural challenges ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 3.97$), .78 for evaluation challenges ($M = 6.47$, $SD = 3.80$), .80 for power play challenges ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 3.70$), and .92 ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 4.44$) for practicality challenges.

Results

The hypothesis predicted negative relationships between perceived instructor immediacy and procedural, evaluation, power, and practicality challenge behaviors. This hypothesis was supported. Results of Pearson correlations revealed negative relationships between student perceptions of instructor immediacy and their likelihood of using procedural ($r = -.32$, $p < .001$), evaluation ($r = -.31$, $p < .001$), power play ($r = -.29$, $p < .001$), and practicality ($r = -.31$, $p < .001$) challenges.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between perceived instructor immediacy and student challenge behavior. All four types of challenge behavior were discovered to be correlated negatively with student perceptions of instructor immediacy. These findings further reinforce the importance of immediacy in instruction and suggest that classroom management may be enforced through immediate behaviors. Student may challenge immediate instructors less frequently for two reasons. First, immediacy may foster a rewarding classroom climate. Mutually rewarding classroom environments

can prevent incivility in the classroom (Bray and Favero, 2004; Yoakley, 1975). Moreover, Palardy (1995) explained that preventing student misbehavior includes numerous teacher strategies that create a comfortable and supportive classroom. Palardy (1995) suggested that immediate teachers may create such an environment. Second, students perceive immediacy as a common teacher affinity-seeking strategy (McCroksey & McCroskey, 1986). Considering that students have more affinity for immediate instructors, they may be less likely to challenge these instructors because they are satisfied with their classroom experiences. Instructor affinity-seeking is associated positively with both student satisfaction in the classroom (Prisbell, 1994) and supportive classroom climate perceptions (Myers, 1995). One limitation to this study involved relying on student perceptions of the lecturer. Future research should examine additional instructor behaviors that may deter objectionable student behavior.

Instructor communication behaviors such as nonimmediacy and belittling are a frequent cause of student incivility (Boice, 1996). Consequently, instructors should be cognizant of using immediate behaviors to avoid unwanted student behavior. Competent instructors will continue to implement immediacy behaviors in their classrooms.

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