Enhancing On-Line Teaching with Verbal Immediacy through Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of instructor verbal immediacy behaviors for on-line classes. Specifically, it demonstrates how instructor verbal immediacy behaviors found in face-to-face classes can also be displayed for on-line classes. It is argued that self-determination theory describes identification of the student as an important role in the instructional context and instructor verbal immediacy behaviors can help with student identification. Implications are given for instructors and administrators at higher education institutions. Future researchers are encouraged to further explore student identification with their instructor for positive instructional outcomes with on-line classes.

Introduction

On-line education has taken an important role in higher education. Recently, it has grown much quicker than face-to-face classes (Allen & Seaman, 2010). As a result of its significance, it becomes important to better understand how instructors can become more effective teaching on-line classes.
One way to increase instructor on-line teaching effectiveness is to try to apply methods that have worked well for face-to-face classes. One such method is the use of instructor verbal immediacy behaviors. Verbal immediacy behaviors have been found to be positively related to student motivation to learn (Anderman, 2004; Elliot & Knight, 2005; Harrison, 2011; Sidelinger, 2010). Immediacy is usually defined as behaviors that communicate approachability (Mehrabian, 1971). People tend to communicate with and become close to people they like and avoid communicating with people they dislike (Mehrabian, 1971; Sidelinger, 2010; Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011).

Verbal immediacy plays an important part in the higher education classroom because it is related to student learning and is not fully understood (Allen, Witt, & Wheeless, 2006; Hess, Smythe, & Communication 451, 2001). The predominance of previous research about instructor verbal immediacy behaviors has been conducted in face-to-face classes at higher education institutions (Elliot & Knight, 2005; Ellis, 2004). However, recently more classes are being offered on-line. It is possible for on-line classes to be as effective as face-to-face classes (Redpath, 2012). The positive outcomes associated with instructor verbal immediacy behaviors inside the classroom can also be found with on-line classes (Hutchins, 2003; LaRose & Whitten, 2000; Rovai, Ponton, Wighting, & Baker, 2007). One way to understand the motivational influence of instructors' verbal immediacy behaviors is through self-determination theory. The theory focuses on the quality of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Beyond focusing on the quality of motivation, self-determination theory addresses the social conditions of the environment from which the motivation is studied (Chirkov, Ryan, & Sheldon, 2011). Therefore, this paper uses self-determination theory to better understand how instructors can specifically use verbal immediacy behaviors to enhance student motivation to learn for on-line classes. The following review of literature first addresses the relationship among teacher verbal immediacy and student motivation to learn and then specifically applied to on-line classes. The section then addresses student motivation through self-determination theory in relation with verbal immediacy for on-line classes.

Teacher Verbal Immediacy and Student Motivation to Learn

Instructors displaying verbal immediacy behaviors can lead to beneficial outcomes inside the classroom (Houser, 2005; Sidelinger, 2010; Velez, & Cano, 2008; Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011; Zhang, Oetzel, Gao, Wilcox, & Takai, 2007). Verbal immediacy is found to have a linear relationship with student

motivation to learn (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Ellis, 2004; Frymier, & Houser, 2000; Velez, & Cano, 2008; Witt, Wheeless, & Allen, 2004). Student motivation is important to understand because it has been linked to student learning (Frymier, & Houser, 2000; Paas, Tuovinen, Merrienboer, & Darabi, 2005; Witt, Wheeless, & Allen, 2004). Furthermore, students often perceive their motivation as a major factor to their educational success (Lebedina-Manzoni, 2004; Sidelinger, 2010).

When applied to a teaching/learning environment, verbal immediacy behaviors are verbal messages that convey the "use of pro-social as opposed to antisocial messages to alter student behavior" (Gorham, 1988, p. 41). Verbal immediacy behaviors include using personal examples, humor, engaging in conversations with students before, after, or outside of class, encouraging students to talk, referring to the class as "we," or "our," asking for students' input, teachers' self-disclosure, addressing students by name, praising students' work, allowing students to address instructors by their first name, and being available for students outside of class if they have any questions (Gorham, 1988).

The examples of verbal immediacy behaviors have a few general themes that emerge from it. First, they communicate caring for the students. The instructor goes beyond relaying information to the class. The instructor is building more of a caring atmosphere. Secondly, the verbal immediacy behaviors illustrate a more individualize learning experience. Each person has an individual experience from the instructor knowing their name and having each student know personal things about the instructor. These general themes of verbal immediacy behaviors of caring and individual instruction can take place in both face-to-face classes and on-line classes. Previous verbal immediacy research for on-line classes has found that instructors can still create a sense of closeness with students through typing verbal immediacy messages (Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005).

Self-Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan (2008) describe motivation as influenced by social situations through the use of self-determination theory, which also applies to higher education instruction. They address previous motivational research as measuring the amount of motivation within a given social situation. However, they take the position that it is not the amount of motivation that is most important but the form and quality of motivation that should be considered.

The two different types of motivation in self-determination theory are autonomous and controlled. Autonomous motivation is performed from the individual's desire to exert effort from their own choice. On the other hand, controlled motivation stems from external pressure to accomplish a particular outcome. Differences in motivation between autonomous and controlled motivation have been found (Darner, 2012). Autonomous motivation benefits more in the areas of motivation, desired behavior, and learning compared to controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Therefore, within higher education instruction, those students who have more autonomous motivation will likely be more motivated and learn more than those who lack such motivation (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Soenens, & Lens, 2004).

Having students achieve autonomous motivation can be difficult for instructors. One possible difficulty Deci and Ryan (2008) found involved identification. Those students who identify more with the instructional context will have more autonomous motivation than those who do not. This occurs because the student internalizes their motivational behaviors that they exhibit for the class. The student's behaviors for the class become part of them through their identity. The student feels that they are able to make their own choices for their behaviors with autonomous motivation, which lead to their perceptions of freedom to control their outcomes. This is important because Deci and Ryan (2008) take the position that humans need to be able to make their own decisions and have some control over the means to their outcomes.

Identification of students with instructors is important to understand when studying the interactions of instructors' verbal immediacy behaviors and students' motivation to learn for on-line classes. Burke's (1964) classical piece on identification addresses the importance of identification when motivation is desired from audience members. He writes that audience members are likely to be open to the communication of the speaker in so much that the audience sees their life in the speaker. An audience is not only receiving information but the communication process is collaborative. The speaker and audience members are linked together. Essentially, the audience is moved by what relates to them and then they

find interest in it.

Verbal immediacy behaviors can be a means through which collaboration within a communication process between instructor and student can occur. The student can have the on-line class become part of their life through verbal immediacy behaviors. A close connection can be established and enriched between the instructor and students as a result of more personal communication. Using verbal immediacy behaviors that identify with students may enhance students' motivation to learn for on-line classes.

Rationale

The previous section reviewing verbal immediacy and student motivation to learn indicated a strong correlation between those variables over the past several decades. However, the literature does not adequately address these relationships at higher education institutions for on-line classes with self-determination theory. The difficulty stems from previous research about verbal immediacy in on-line classes using Gorham's (1988) instrument developed for face to face classes. The previous research uses the entire instrument and reports general findings. This paper investigates the use of specific instructor verbal immediacy behaviors in order to identify with students and enhance their motivation to learn as understood through self-determination theory.

Identification can link extrinsic motivators with motivation resembling autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Instructor verbal immediacy behaviors can be considered extrinsic motivators. They are situational factors that can encourage student motivation. Subsequently, students in on-line classes are more likely to attribute their motivation as their own autonomous choices when an instructor displays verbal immediacy behaviors that identify with students.

Identification of a student in their on-line class can impact their motivation and success. Baker and Woods (2004) take the position that the contact an instructor has with a student is important in on-line classes. They state that contact can lead to a connectedness with students. Therefore, university students who have more communication contact during an on-line class will have more opportunities to identify with the instructor. This can occur because they have more time to internalize the identity of the instructor into their life. Identifying with a person or social situation takes time to occur (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Specific instructor verbal immediacy behaviors can be used to increase instructor contact and identification with students.

Discussion

Previous research studies investigating the relationship between instructors' verbal immediacy behaviors and students' motivation to learn were primarily conducted at higher education institutions with face-to-face classes (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Elliot & Knight, 2005; Ellis, 2004; Seifert, 2004). One reason for previous research studying verbal immediacy and student motivation more for face-to-face classes may come from the differing contexts. Using the specific verbal immediacy behaviors identified in face-to-face classes is different with on-line classes due to little if any verbal interactions.

Interactions between instructors and students are important to understand (Jones, 2012; Redpath, 2012). More recently, research has indicated that students can perceive instructor verbal immediacy behaviors in on-line classes. Student awareness of instructor verbal immediacy behaviors can lead to positive outcomes for on-line classes (Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009). Bailie (2011) did find similarities with using verbal immediacy behaviors between face-to-face classes and on-line classes. He found that initiating and maintaining contact in both contexts are important. This can be done through weekly announcements and individual communication, such as through e-mails. Essentially, having contact with each student can be done in both contexts and is important. Another category is personalizing the communication. Personalized communication can occur through individual feedback on assignments and encouraging students to share their own personal examples and views. Lastly, stimulation through communication is important. This can occur by personalizing the instruction to each student by using their name, asking questions, and using personal examples.

Redpath (2012) also addresses the importance of interaction between instructors and students for on-line

classes. The interactions can take the form of verbal immediacy such as using humor and self-disclosure. These behaviors can lead to improved student motivation to learn. One can also make the argument that these examples of verbal immediacy behaviors can be used to build identification between instructors and students. Instructors can self-disclose information that they think is familiar to students. Students may then be able to relate to those experiences that their instructor self-disclosed.

This paper differs from previous research on these topics by stressing self-determination theory and the use of instructor verbal immediacy behaviors to motivate and identify with on-line students. This is important because a human connection can then be made through verbal immediacy behaviors (Baker & Woods, 2004). This connection between instructors and students can become important to student motivation according to self-determination theory.

It can benefit on-line instructors for their students to identify with them. Deci and Ryan (2008) stress the importance of students to identify with their instructors to help with autonomous motivation. When students identify with their instructors it can open up the communication between them. Burke (1964) emphasizes the importance of identification in the communication process involving motivation. According to Burke those students who associate their life with the communicator, in this case their instructors, the students are likely to be more open to their communication. Students will become more involved in the communication process. The more involved and open students are to the communication of their instructors, the more influential instructors' verbal immediacy behaviors might be with students' motivation to learn.

For on-line classes, instructors can use specific verbal immediacy behaviors in an attempt to identify with students. Instructors can self-disclose through an introductory biography sent to each student. This can include their educational background and current students may then identify with the instructor because they are currently going through similar academic experiences with the same instructor in their on-line class. Students may then realize that their instructor understands what it is like to be a student because the instructor was once a student. Instructors can also use humor that is related to course material and relevant to current events familiar with students. For example, humor that connects class material to popular culture events or characters can help instructors identify with students. This can occur through typed notes from the instructor or video clips that the instructor posts for the class. Another approach for instructors is the use of personal examples. Instructors can use personal examples related to course material that students can identify with such as dating, sporting events, and hobbies to name a few. For instance, they can do this by typing the examples or showing videos of the professor demonstrating class material through a personal hobby. A chemistry professor who likes to bake can use a baking demonstration to show how different chemicals react. Those students who have interest in food or cooking can then identify better with the instructor. Instructors can also provide individualized feedback on assignments and other types of personalized advisement that can be helpful to their students. Students will then likely identify with the instructor as a result of the message specifically phrased for them. This can be done electronically in on-line classes. These examples of verbal immediacy behaviors that encourage identification may lead to more autonomous student motivation. These are just a few ways that instructors can better use verbal immediacy behaviors in on-line classes specifically aimed to identify with their students.

Conclusion

A major complaint for students in on-line classes is the lack of personal interaction with their instructor. This concern for students can hinder their satisfaction with on-line classes (Menchaca, & Bekele, 2008). On-line administration practices and policies can be implemented to assist with encouraging instructors to identify with their students through verbal immediacy behaviors. A plethora of research indicates that instructor presence in on-line courses can enhance student motivation (Stacey, 2002; Tu, & McIsaac, 2002). An instructor can make their presence known and increase student motivation through verbal immediacy behaviors with students (Fisher, & Katt, 2007; Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005).

The verbal immediacy behaviors that are used should be considered. Students knowing about their instructors' personal lives from on-line descriptions can help (DiVerniero & Hosek, 2011). Policies can be implemented that require on-line instructors to create a homepage consisting of short biographies about themselves as an introduction to their on-line classes. These can include their educational

background and personal hobbies. Students might then identify with information on the homepage that may otherwise not be revealed during the semester. Another possible policy to implement would be to encourage individual grading of at least one assignment for each on-line class. It is more personal and another opportunity for students to identify with their instructor if they receive personal feedback on at least one assignment such as a written paper as opposed to only receiving test grades that are automatically computer graded. A last possible suggestion is to give faculty the resources to vocally communicate using verbal immediacy behaviors with the hopes of identifying with their students. For example, video recording devices instructors can use to record lectures involving personal examples of course material that relate to students. Another resource would be vocal devices that allow instructors to speak live with students and set aside live office hours to verbally communicate with them concerning individual questions or issues.

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