

The Relationship between College Student Class Participation and Perceived Instructor Communicator Style

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between college student class participation and perceived instructor communicator style. Participants were 262 undergraduate students who completed a measure of classroom participation (Fassinger, 1995) and the Communicator Style Measure-Short Form (Norton, 1978). Results indicated that (a) class participation was positively correlated with the human, actor, and authority instructor communicator styles and (b) students reported 0-32 attempts at class participation, with an average of 1.8 comments or questions offered during a typical class period. Future research should examine whether students have a preference for particular communicator style attributes when instructors utilize various instructional strategies.

One way in which college students actively engage in their educational experience is through class participation (Cohen, 1991). Class participation, which is defined broadly as the comments offered and questions asked by students during class time (Fassinger, 2000), has benefits for both students and instructors (Rocca, 2001). For students, class participation increases their state motivation (Junn, 1994), signals their involvement in the course content (Wulff & Wulff, 2004), improves their communication skills (Berdine, 1986), stimulates their critical thinking abilities (Garside, 1996), and increases their affect for learning (Richter & Tjosvold, 1980). For instructors, class participation promotes the discussion of controversial issues, serves as an indicator of student learning, encourages and affirms student contributions, and provides a means for student evaluation (Berdine, 1986; Cohen, 1991; Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004). As such, it is no surprise class participation is a behavior desired by instructors (Brozo & Schmelzer, 1985; Parr & Valerius, 1999).

At the same time, a primary reason why students do not participate in class is due to instructors (Wade, 1994). Instructors who are considered

“boring, bored, pushy, moody, closed-minded, too opinionated, condescending, [or] unfriendly” (p. 23) are likely to have students who do not participate in class (Berdine, 1986). Conversely, when students perceive their instructors as approachable, supportive, verbally immediate, and nonverbally immediate, they are more likely to participate in class (Fassinger, 2000; Menzel & Carrell, 1999; Rocca, 2001). Other instructor behaviors which stimulate class participation include enthusiasm (Armstrong & Boud, 1983), patience (Beacham, 1991), encouragement (Smith, 1977), and listening (Cohen, 1991).

Communicator style, which is the way an instructor “verbally, nonverbally, and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, filtered, or understood” (Norton, 1978, p. 99), is an instructor communicative behavior which encapsulates many of the aforementioned behaviors. Communicator style is comprised of any combination of 10 communicative attributes: impression leaving, contentious, open, dramatic, dominant, precise, relaxed, friendly, attentive, and animated (Norton, 1978, 1983). *Impression leaving* instructors have a memorable style, which depends on their affiliative expressiveness and use of information-seeking behaviors. *Contentious* instructors like to debate and may get somewhat hostile, quarrelsome, or belligerent. *Open* instructors are extroverted, unreserved, straightforward, and do not have problems directly communicating their thoughts or emotions. *Dramatic* instructors are verbally and vocally active, and use stylistic devices (e.g., exaggerations, voice, rhythm, stories) to underscore content. *Dominant* instructors “take charge” of the situation by talking louder, longer, and frequently. *Precise* instructors are accurate, using well-defined arguments and specific proof or evidence to clarify their statements. *Relaxed* instructors appear anxiety-free, calm and at ease when engaged in interactions with others. *Friendly* instructors recognize students in a positive way and are considered to be kind and caring. *Attentive* instructors are alert, listen with empathy, and are concerned with understanding students. *Animated* instructors are physically active and use eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, body movement, and posture to underscore content.

Potter and Emanuel (1990) categorized the 10 communicator style attributes into one of three instructor communicator style categories: human, authority, and actor. The *human* instructor recognizes students as individuals and uses the open, attentive, friendly, and relaxed

communicator style attributes. The *authority* instructor is in charge and conducts class efficiently by using the precise, dominant, and contentious communicator style attributes. The *actor* instructor is a storyteller who uses the dramatic, animated, and impression leaving communicator style attributes.

Because students prefer instructors who use the friendly, attentive, and relaxed attributes (Potter & Emanuel, 1990); are highly satisfied when instructors are friendly, attentive, relaxed, and dramatic (Prisbell, 1994); and associate instructor use of the open, impression leaving, and relaxed attributes with solidarity (Andersen, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981), it stands to reason students will be more likely to participate in class if instructors are perceived to use the human and the actor communicator styles. Conversely, because students rate the dominant and precise attributes as the least desirable in an instructor (Potter & Emanuel, 1990) and instructors who are perceived to use the dominant, contentious, and precise attributes are also perceived as verbally aggressive (Myers & Rocca, 2000), it stands to reason students will be less likely to participate in class if instructors are perceived to use the authoritarian communicator style. To investigate this idea, the following hypotheses are posited:

- H1: A direct relationship will exist between student class participation and perceived instructor use of the human (i.e. open, attentive, friendly, relaxed) communicator style and the actor (i.e., dramatic, animated, impression leaving) communicator style.
- H2: An indirect relationship will exist between student class participation and perceived instructor use of the authority (i.e., precise, dominant, contentious) communicator style.

Additionally, we were curious about the frequency with which college students participate in class. Although it is known that college students ask questions and use information-seeking strategies (Aitken & Neer, 1993; Myers & Knox, 2001; Pearson & West, 1991), research findings illustrating how often students participate in class are scant. In a small class, students ask an average of 3-4 questions per 50-minute class period (Pearson & West, 1991; West & Pearson, 1994); in a large lecture class (i.e., 400 students), students ask an average of 10-15 questions per

50-minute class (Nelson & Pearson, 1999). Fassinger (2000) obtained a mean participation score of 11 attempts made by all students during a typical class period. To contribute to this limited body of research, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: During a typical class period, how frequently do students report participating?

Method

Participants

Participants were 262 undergraduate students (146 men, 111 women, five students did not report their sex) enrolled in an undergraduate communication course at a mid-Atlantic university. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 45 years ($M = 19.68$, $SD = 4.81$). One hundred and forty nine ($n = 149$) participants were first year students, 46 participants were sophomores, 33 participants were juniors, 29 participants were seniors, five participants were post-undergraduates, and two participants did not provide their class standing. The majority of the participants ($n = 146$) reported on a class with an enrollment of 50 or more students, 33 participants reported on a class with an enrollment of 30-50 students, 55 students reported on a class with an enrollment of 11-30 students, and six students reported on a class with an enrollment of 10 students or less.

Procedures and Instrumentation

On the second day of the semester, participants were asked to identify a course they had taken during the previous semester and to complete two instruments in reference to their enrollment in the course. The two instruments were a measure of classroom participation (Fassinger, 1995) and the Communicator Style Measure-Short Form (Norton, 1978). The measure of classroom participation is a six-item scale that asks students to (a) provide a numerical account of how many times they offered a comment or raised a question during a typical class period (i.e., one item) and (b) indicate how often, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from *very often* (5) to *never* (1), they contribute to class discussion, volunteer in class, and express their personal opinion

(i.e., five items). Fassinger (1995) reported a reliability coefficient of .84 for the six-item scale. In this study, a reliability coefficient of .93 ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.07$) was obtained for five of the six items. (The one item which asked students to provide a numerical account of how many times they participated during a typical class period was not included in the reliability analysis.)

The *Communicator Style Measure-Short Form* is a 10-item instrument that asks respondents to report their perceptions of their instructors' communicator style. Participants were supplied with a four-sentence description of each of the 10 communicator style attributes (i.e., impression leaving, contentious, open, dramatic, dominant, precise, relaxed, friendly, attentive, animated). Using a scale ranging from *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1), respondents were asked to indicate the level of agreement in which their instructor used each attribute. This measure has been successfully employed in previous studies (Infante & Gorden, 1987, 1989; Montgomery & Norton, 1981; Myers & Rocca, 2000).

Data Analysis

The hypotheses were explored using a series of Pearson Product-Moment correlations. Perceived instructor use of the human, actor, and authority communicator styles was calculated by summing the items that comprised each style (i.e. the open, attentive, friendly, and relaxed attributes were summed to create a composite score for the human style; the dramatic, animated, and impression leaving attributes were summed to create a composite score for the actor style; and the precise, dominant, and contentious attributes were summed to create a composite score for the authority style). Student participation was calculated by summing the five items using the Likert scale that inquired whether students contribute to class discussion, volunteer in class, and express their personal opinion. The research question was answered by obtaining an average for the one-item measure of how many times students offered a comment or raised a question during a typical class period.

Results

The first hypothesis predicted a direct relationship would exist between student class participation and perceived instructor use of the human and actor communicator styles. The hypothesis was supported: $r(261) = .26$, $p < .001$ for the human communicator style; $r(262) = .26$, $p < .001$ for the actor communicator style.

The second hypothesis predicted an indirect relationship would exist between student class participation and perceived instructor use of the authority communicator style. The hypothesis was not supported. Instead, the results indicated a direct relationship exists between student class participation and perceived instructor use of the authority communicator style, $r(261) = .38$, $p < .001$.

The research question inquired about the frequency with which students report participating (i.e., offer comments or raise questions) during a typical class period. Students reported 0-32 attempts at class participation, with an average of 1.8 ($SD = 3.23$; $Mdn = 1.0$, $Mo = 0$) comments uttered or questions asked during a typical class period.

Because class size could affect the frequency with which students participate in class, a series of post-hoc partial correlations controlling for class size was computed between the summed class participation score and the three instructor communicator styles (i.e., human, actor, authority). Positive correlations were obtained between student class participation and perceived instructor use of the human communicator style, $r(257) = .25$, $p < .001$; the actor communicator style, $r(257) = .29$, $p < .001$; and the authority communicator style, $r(257) = .36$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between college student class participation and perceived instructor communicator style. Two general findings were obtained. The first finding was that college student class participation is positively correlated with perceived instructor use of the human, the actor, and the authority instructor communicator styles. In examining the first finding, it is not surprising that positive correlations were obtained between student class participation and both the human and the actor communicator styles. Prior research has established that when instructors

are perceived to use the attributes that comprise the human and the actor communicator styles, instructors are rated by students as being effective. For instance, effective instructors are perceived as being more relaxed, friendly, and open (i.e., human) as well as dramatic and impression leaving (i.e., actor) than instructors who are perceived as being ineffective (Anderson et al., 1981; Norton & Nussbaum, 1980; Schroeder & Leber, 1993). This finding may also explain why student perceived learning is positively related to instructor communicator style. As previously discovered, student affective and behavioral learning are predicted, in part, by the impression leaving, relaxed, open, attentive, dramatic, and friendly communicator style attributes (Andersen et al., 1981; Myers & Horvath, 1997; Norton, 1977; Norton & Nussbaum, 1980). Additionally, Myers, Martin, and Mottet (2000) found that perceived instructor use of the impression leaving, friendly, and animated communicator style attributes predicts, in part, why students are motivated to communicate with their instructors for relational, participatory, and functional reasons. Taken together, the results of these past studies, as well as the findings reported in this study, suggest perceived instructor use of the human and the actor communicator styles may promote student participation in a variety of forms.

More surprising, however, was the positive correlation obtained between student class participation and the authority communicator style. At first glance, this finding appears perplexing due to recent research which has suggested perceived instructor caring and confirmation are essential to students' success in the classroom (Ellis, 2000). Yet, instructor use of the authority communicator style may stimulate student class participation for two reasons. First, instructors who use the authority communicator style may be perceived as creating a learning community where instructors stimulate student interaction through their use of the precise, dominant, and contentious communicator style attributes. According to Book and Putnam (1992), in a learning community, instructors model communicative behaviors which encourage the exchange of ideas, the analysis of arguments, and the provision of evidence to support these ideas and arguments. Instructors who promote a learning community may be perceived by their students as challenging, demanding, or forceful, which then stimulate student participation. Second, perceived instructor use of the authority communicator style may be a style which college students expect their

instructors to employ. As Hayward (2003) reported, college students expect their instructors to have a strong command of the subject matter, to be clear, and to stimulate student interest in the subject matter. Thus, when instructors communicate using the precise, dominant, and contentious attributes, students may be more inclined to participate in class because the instructors' behaviors meet the students' expectations of how college instructors should communicate.

In examining the second finding, students reported participating, on average, 1.8 times during a typical class period. Although this number is lower than the number of attempts obtained in prior research efforts, recall that (a) the majority of participants reported on a class in which enrollment was 50 or more students and (b) participation was operationally defined as offering a comment or asking a question. It is possible students' reports of class participation would change if another definition was provided to the participants. According to Melvin and Lord (1995), scholars have not agreed on the components which constitute class participation. Additionally, it is possible student class participation is affected by a host of factors not explored in this study. These factors include the extent to which instructors actively solicit student participation, whether instructors direct their requests for participation toward one student or toward all students, whether these requests take the form of open or closed questions, whether these requests require students to recall information or provide an opinion, whether student participation is linked with a particular instructional routine or strategy, and whether students are prompted to participate based on a comment or question proffered by a classmate. Future research should strive to identify these factors and their subsequent impact on student participation.

Future research should also examine whether students have a preference for particular communicator style attributes when instructors either lecture or lead discussion. Extant research conducted by Holladay and Coombs (1993) found that individuals who deliver strong messages are considered more dominant, animated, open, friendly, dramatic, and attentive than individuals who deliver weak messages. Instructors who utilize these same attributes, then, may find that students rate them more positively when they lecture or lead discussion. Additionally, given the increasing number of nontraditional students enrolling in higher education (US Department of Education, National Center for Education

Statistics, 2002), it might prove prudent to explore whether perceived instructor communicator style attributes impacts their participation in class. Houser (2004) reported that nontraditional students welcome an open dialogue between students and instructors. Because traditional and nontraditional students differ in the instructor communicator style attributes they consider to exemplify teaching effectiveness (Comadena, Semlak, & Escott, 1992), identifying how instructor communicator style attributes influence the class participation of nontraditional students could be useful in enhancing these students' educational experience.

In sum, the findings of this study indicate that perceived instructor use of the human, actor, and authority communicator styles are positively correlated with student class participation and that students report participating in class, on average, 1.8 times during a typical class period. Instructors should consider that if they use the human, actor, and/or authority communicator styles, student class participation might increase. Because a positive link exists between instructor communicator style and perceived instructor effectiveness (Nussbaum, 1992; Sallinen-Kuparinen, 1992), utilizing the right combination of communicator style attributes could result in additional favorable outcomes for both instructors and students.

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