



Effective Instructional Practice: Enhancing Your Credibility

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Credibility stems from Aristotle's notion of *ethos* and is defined as the "attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a communicator" (McCroskey & Young, 1981, p. 24). Instructor credibility refers to students' perceptions of an instructor as a believable source of communication and includes three dimensions: competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). *Competence* refers to an instructor's perceived expertise and qualifications; *trustworthiness* involves the perceived character and honesty of the instructor; and *goodwill* is the perceived caring that results from empathy, understanding, and responsiveness (McCroskey & Teven).

Enhancing your instructor credibility is important for three reasons. First, students learn more from instructors that they perceive as credible. Students have higher motivation and are more likely to study in classes taught by credible instructors (Frymier & Thompson, 1992; Martin, Chesebro, & Mottet, 1997) and instructor credibility is associated positively with increased affective learning and cognitive learning (McCroskey, Valencic, & Richmond, 2004; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). Instructor credibility has such a strong influence on students learning that it accounts for 20% of the variance across a range of instructional outcomes (Finn, Schrodtt, Witt, Elledge, Jernberg, & Larson, 2009).

Second, students connect more with instructors that they perceive as credible. Students feel more understood by instructors that they perceive as credible (Schrodtt,

2003; Schrodtt, Turman, & Soliz, 2006) and are more likely to communicate with credible instructors outside-of-class (Myers, 2004). Students are also more likely to register to take another course from an instructor and to recommend that their friends take a course from that same instructor if they perceive the instructor to be credible (McCroskey, Holdridge, & Toomb, 1974). Third, students like taking classes from instructors that they view as credible. Not only do students give more favorable teaching evaluations to credible instructors (Beatty & Zahn, 1990), but they also respect credible instructors more (Martinez-Egger & Powers, 2007) and perceive greater justice in the classroom (Chory, 2007).

Five Tips for Enhancing Credibility in the Classroom

1. Use immediacy and affinity-seeking behaviors. Immediacy behaviors are verbal and nonverbal behaviors that reduce physical or psychological distance and communicate a willingness to be approached by another person. Examples of immediacy behaviors include addressing students by their names, moving around the classroom while talking, smiling at students, asking questions to encourage students to talk, using appropriate humor, and praising students' work or comments (Gorham, 1998). Affinity-seeking strategies are behaviors that are intended to build a positive attitude toward oneself in another person and include behaviors such as positive self-disclosure, stressing areas of positive similarity, and expressing cooperation (Frymier & Thompson, 1992). Immediacy behaviors and affinity-seeking behaviors are both associated with stronger perceptions of instructor credibility.

2. Maintain a strong presence in your classroom. Instructors who are assertive and responsive to their students are viewed as more credible (Martin et al., 1997).

Instructors who can challenge their students by advocating for or refuting positions are also perceived as possessing stronger credibility, but instructors have to be careful that their argumentativeness does not cross the line into verbal aggressiveness (Schrodt, 2003). Students also perceive instructors who can manage compulsive communicators with pro-social management strategies as being more credible (McPherson & Liang, 2007).

3. Communicate with your students outside of class as well as in the classroom. Myers (2004) found that there is a positive relationship correlation between perceived instructor credibility and out-of-class communication. Talking with students when you see them at campus or off campus events, e-mailing students who have been missing class, and responding to student e-mail and phone messages are a few examples of ways that you can use out-of- class communication to help students perceive you as caring and trustworthy.

4. Use technology in moderation and establish clear technology policies for your students. Instructors who use technology in appropriate ways that enhance learning are considered to be more credible than instructors who do not use technology at all or who rely exclusively on technology for instruction (Schrodt & Turman, 2005). Within the classroom, policies encouraging student use of technology for educational purposes is positively related with all three dimensions of credibility, but failing to establish a technology policy or completely banning the use of technology entirely can have the opposite effect (Finn & Ledbetter, 2013)

5. Do not engage in instructor misbehaviors. Instructor misbehaviors fit into one of three categories: *incompetence*, which includes behaviors that show a lack of basic

teaching skills, such as assigning excessive work and not caring about the course; *offensiveness*, which includes cruel behaviors such as humiliating students and using profanity; and *indolence*, which includes behaviors such as failing to show up for class and returning assignments late (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991). Instructors who engage in any of these three types of behaviors run the risk of losing credibility in their students' eyes (Banfield, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006).

Assessing Your Credibility

To measure instructor credibility, ask students to complete the 18-item Measure of Ethos/Credibility (McCroskey & Teven, 1999).

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