Effective Instructional Practices:

Optimizing Your Immediacy

Jon A. Hess, University of Dayton

Instructor immediacy refers to messages that convey closeness and nonverbal interaction (Anderson, 1979). It is commonly understood as communication that shows positive affect toward students. This impact is most easily identified in the nonverbal realm. Nonverbal immediacy seems to include at least two major groups of cues: face and body. Immediate behaviors with the face include more animated facial expressions, making eye contact with students (and not spending too much time looking at notes, the board, or a projector), smiling, and nodding encouragement. Considering that immediacy messages convey emotional and relational information and that facial expressions are one of the primary ways people judge emotions, these facial cues seem particularly important. However, there are a wide range of other channels that are also quite powerful. Instructors can convey immediacy through dynamic gestures, orienting their body toward--rather than away from--students, moving closer to students, moving around the classroom, and maintaining a relaxed body position (McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, & Barraclough, 1995; Smythe & Hess, 2005).

The existence of immediacy as a verbal behavior has been debated. Although Mehrabian (1966) began his seminal work on immediacy in the verbal realm, it is unclear whether people can reliably recognize the verbal codes that would constitute a more immediate message. Interpreting "us" as immediate requires a listener to know that the speaker intentionally chose not to say "you and I." In contrast, people always understand the meaning of a smile. While immediacy is most pronounced in face-to-

face settings, research shows that it can be identified in online settings through use of emoticons, color, visual imagery, and more (Dixson, Greenwell, Weister, Rogers-Stacy, & Lauer, 2016). Immediacy is a robust construct that is important across cultures (Zhang, Oetzel, Xiaofang, Wilcox, & Takai, 2007).

Optimizing your immediacy is important for three reasons. First, immediacy can facilitate better classroom interactions. For example, it can reduce student apprehension, student complaints, and negative effects of verbal aggressiveness (Mazer & Stowe, 2016). Second, immediate communication with students fosters better affective (i.e., emotional, relational) outcomes from a class. It is important to recognize that as an affective message, immediacy functions most directly in the affective domain. While learning content is the primary goal of any course, there are other important outcomes of education that should not be overlooked. Immediacy can help students feel better supported by their instructor, more encouraged to continue study in a particular academic field, and better mentored (Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2015). It can increase liking of the course and instructor, and promote higher judgments of instructor credibility (Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011).

Third, and perhaps most important, immediacy can help content-related messages function to their greatest effect. It is important to recognize that as a message unrelated to course content, immediacy cannot *cause* learning. For example, less clarity in a lecture reduces learning, even if the instructor uses good immediacy (Bolkan, Goodboy, & Myers, 2016). Learning comes from student engagement with content. However, that engagement can be greatly enhanced or undermined by the environment, and immediacy done well can contribute to an environment optimally

2

supportive of learning. The positive relational messages immediacy expresses can reduce students' social anxiety that can interfere with their cognitive processing of class content. For example, one study found that immediacy can reduce math anxiety, allowing students in methods or statistics classes to put more mental resources toward complex quantitative tasks (Kelly, Rice, Wyatt, Ducking, & Denton, 2015). Immediacy may increase students' willingness to comply with challenging tasks, which can also increase focus on course content. And, through the increase in arousal that eye contact and other cues create, immediacy can sometimes engage students who might otherwise be less attentive.

Five Tips on Optimizing Your Immediacy

1. Take advantage of the time before class starts. Many instructors think about teaching bounded by the assigned class hour, missing out on a critical time when immediacy can help build relationships. Arrive early and chat with students before class begins. In doing so, walk around the room to be closer to students, smile, and engage in eye contact. The immediacy you establish before class sets the tone of the class to follow, and it provides better relational foundations that can pay off in mentoring, guiding controversial discussions, and helping students navigate complex cognitive tasks.

2. Get rid of barriers between yourself and your students. Barriers, such as the podium in the classroom or the desk in your office, send a message of separation from students. Some instructors use barriers while teaching to create a feeling of safety for themselves, or in their office to build a power distance. But, the negative outcome of decreased relational connection can overwhelm these benefits. In class, carry your notes and move in front of the podium. Sitting on, rather than behind, a desk at the front

of a room, or in smaller classrooms with movable chairs, sitting with the entire class in a circle creates a connection with students that pays dividends in the class learning environment. In your office, position your desk to the side so that it is not between you and your student when you meet, or move your chair to the side of the desk when a student attends office hours.

3. Use immediacy behaviors in class discussion to facilitate better outcomes. Student participation in discussion is one of the most important learning tools, but discussion can sometimes be difficult to manage effectively. It can be a challenge to get quiet students to speak, and it can be a difficult to respond to comments that seem misguided, or worse, potentially offensive. Creating social comfort makes it easier for students to speak without threat. And, as students feel more positive affect and goodwill from an instructor, it is easier for you to challenge the content of their ideas without threatening your support of them or their educational success.

4. Use immediacy to make lectures more engaging. Smile, move around the classroom as you talk, make eye contact, gesture, show expressiveness in your face, and avoid a monotone voice. Making lectures more immediate offers multiple benefits. The increased stimulation of movement and the positive feel of a relational connection may increase students' attention and engagement. And, the confidence these cues display can even increase your comfort in front of the class.

5. Keep your immediacy appropriate and natural. Immediacy cues can be overdone or used in a clumsy manner. Smiles that look posed or appear at unnatural times seem contrived, manipulative, or untrustworthy. Too much eye contact can become an uncomfortable stare-down (Kelly et al., 2015) or just seem creepy. Overly

flamboyant gestures may become distracting. To optimize immediacy, do not just blindly throw in immediacy cues at random times, but rather, work to appropriately emphasize those behaviors as they occur naturally in conversation.

Assessing Your Immediacy

Among many instruments available, by far the most commonly used tool to assess immediacy is McCroskey et al.'s (1995) Revised Nonverbal Immediacy Measure. Smythe and Hess's (2005) Nonverbal Immediacy in College Classroom Instruction is another viable measure.

References

Andersen, J. F. (1979). Teacher immediacy as a predictor of teaching effectiveness. In B. D. Ruben (Ed.), *Communication yearbook* (Vol. 3, pp. 543-559). Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Bolkan, S., Goodboy, A. K., & Myers, S. A. (2016). Conditional processes of effective instructor communication and increases in students' cognitive learning. *Communication Education*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/03634523.2016.1241889

Dixson, M. D., Greenwell, M., Weister, T., Rogers-Stacy, C., & Lauer, S. (2016). Nonverbal immediacy behaviors and online student engagement: Bringing past instructional research into the present virtual classroom. *Communication Education*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/03634523.2016.1209222

Kelly, S., Rice, C., Wyatt, B., Ducking, J., & Denton, Z. (2015). Teacher immediacy and decreased student quantitative reasoning anxiety: The mediating effect of perception. *Communication Education, 64*, 171-186.

doi:10.1080/03634523.2015.1014383

Kerssen-Griep, J., & Witt, P. L. (2015). Instructional feedback III: How do instructor facework tactics and immediacy cues interact to predict student perceptions of being mentored? *Communication Education, 64*, 1-24. doi:10.1080/03634523.2014.978797

Mazer, J. P., & Stowe, S. A. (2016). Can teacher immediacy reduce the impact of verbal aggressiveness? Examining effects on student outcomes and perceptions of teacher credibility. *Western Journal of Communication, 80*, 21-37. doi:10.1080/10570314.2014.943421

McCroskey, J. C., Richmond, V P., Sallinen, A., Fayer, J. M., & Barraclough, R. A. (1995). A cross-cultural and multi-behavioral analysis of the relationship between nonverbal immediacy and teacher evaluation. *Communication Education, 44,* 281-291. doi:10.1080/03634529509379019

Mehrabian, A. (1966). Immediacy: An indicator of attitudes in linguistic communication. *Journal of Personality, 34*, 26-34.

Smythe, M. J., & Hess, J. A. (2005). Are student self-reports a valid method for measuring teacher nonverbal immediacy? *Communication Education, 54*, 170-179. doi:10.1080/03634520500213389

Witt, P. L., & Kerssen-Griep, J. (2011). Instructional feedback I: The interaction of facework and immediacy on students' perceptions of instructor credibility. *Communication Education, 60*, 75-94. doi:10.1080/03634523.2010.507820

Zhang, Q., Oetzel, J. G., Xiaofang, G., Wilcox, R. G., & Takai, J. (2007). Teacher immediacy scales: Testing for validity across cultures. *Communication*

Education, 56, 228-248. doi:10.1080/03634520601089092