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Students' Motives for Communicating with Their Instructors

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As college instructors, we are well aware of the role communication plays in the classroom. In some cases, we may be too aware. Researchers have studied the effects of instructor communication across a wide variety of classroom contexts and have generally concluded that instructor communication significantly and positively affects students' perceived motivation, learning, and satisfaction, among other outcomes. As a result of these studies, college instructors have the ability to modify their instructional behaviors and skills that can promote learning, ensure a safe learning environment, and create a supportive classroom climate.

However, what has remained understudied is student communication in the classroom. As any instructor can attest, college students *do* and *can* engage in communication in the classroom for a variety of reasons. For some students, a willingness to communicate with their classmates or their instructors may be based on their personalities, their desire to forge new relationships, or their need to attain information. Yet, little is known about the reasons, or motives, why students communicate with their instructors.

Back in the 1960s, Schutz identified three main reasons for why people communicate with others: affection, inclusion, and control. *Affection* is the need to communicate with others to express caring and love. *Inclusion* is the need to communicate with others to participate in and maintain relationships. *Control* is the need to communicate with others in order to maintain power and influence

others. Schutz argued that people communicate with others in order to satisfy these needs.

Building on the work of Schutz, in 1988, Rubin, Perse, and Barbato were interested in why people talk, with whom people talk, and what people talk about. In doing so, they identified three other motives (in addition to affection, inclusion, and control) for why people communicate with others. These three were pleasure, relaxation, and escape. *Pleasure* involves the need to be excited or entertained. *Relaxation* deals with a need to rest or to feel less tense. *Escape* focuses on a need to avoid other activities and worries. Rubin argued that these six motives influence how and why people communicate. However, she also made it clear that in different contexts, people have different motives, or reasons, for communicating with others.

This chapter explores why and how students communicate with their instructors. For the last several years, we have studied the motives students have for communicating with their instructors. In doing so, we have identified five of them: relational, functional, excuse-making, participation, and sycophancy.

When students communicate for *relational* purposes, they are trying to develop personal relationships with their instructors. Communication for *functional* reasons includes learning more about the material and the assignments in the course. Students also communicate to offer *excuses*, attempting to explain why work is late or missing or to challenge grading criteria. A fourth reason students have for communicating is for *participation*. Students want to demonstrate to their instructors that they are interested in the class and that they understand the material. A fifth reason is *sycophancy*, getting on the instructor's good side. Students may communicate in order to make a favorable impression or to get the instructor's approval. The following section looks at each of these reasons more closely.

Students' Motives

One reason students communicate with teachers is for *relational* purposes. Students might perceive their instructors as someone they could be friends with, someone with whom they could discuss daily events. Talking about the local football team, the new blockbuster movie, or the local restaurant scene are all examples of topics that teachers and students may talk about. Research in the area of interpersonal communication consistently shows that people are attracted to others who are similar to themselves. Often during interactions, people search for commonalities. If the teacher has not seen the recent movie, the student may talk about a musical group that both of them like. If the teacher and student do not share any common interests, they might possibly talk about weekend activities or current events in the news. The focus of relational communication is more on the individuals involved than on any issues involving the course content.

Why would students spend time talking to instructors about things that do not concern the course? One explanation could be that students genuinely believe that the instructors are potential friends, people who are actually interested in having a relationship outside of the classroom. Students may possibly see this type of communication as a way of learning more about their teachers, their likes and dislikes. Or as was mentioned earlier, students may realize the benefit of having a cordial relationship with their instructors. This is not to say that students intend to manipulate their instructors or take advantage of their relationships. Instead, students recognize the potential benefit of having instructors who know them and enjoy talking to them about their interests.

This type of communication would seemingly occur before or after a class session. In fact, if this type of communication took place during the course lecture on a regular basis and the teacher allowed it, it would probably be considered a teacher misbehavior. Students might enjoy playing the game of "Let's have the teacher talk about anything besides the course material." If the teacher allows the game to be played, or even initiates the game, this would be a misbehavior. Understandably, students do not react positively to instructor misbehavior. Thus, for most students, this type of communication would occur before or after a class session, in order to maximize the relational impact.

A second reason students communicate with their instructors is for *functional* purposes. Students need information about the course. The best source of information about the course is often the instructor. Students ask their instructors questions in order to learn what the expectations of the course are, to better understand the material, and to clarify the requirements for assignments and exams. Even if this information is provided in a syllabus or a textbook, students may feel more comfortable or reassured hearing the same information from instructors themselves.

Functional communication is considered to be instrumental. People communicate for this reason with a specific goal in mind. They want information; thus they ask questions. The information that is gained is used to succeed in the course. Unless students need some information about the course (i.e., directions, assignments), they are not heard from. "Is this going to be on the test" is an example of a communication message that is asked purely for functional purposes. A benefit of students talking for functional purposes is that instructors' responses often clarify to all students what is expected and desired from them.

A third reason students communicate with their instructors is for *excuse making*. When work is late, when work is incomplete, when students are late for class or fail to attend altogether, students often inform their instructors of the reasons why. While almost all students will find it necessary to explain an absence or late work to an instructor at one time or another, other students habitually seem to have excuses for every day of the week.

Instructors by midterm are often able to identify those students who communicate primarily for excuse-making. These students are often seldom heard from, except when they have a problem that prevents them from succeeding in

the course. One recent student of ours had a horrible semester: she had several grandparents die, her parents spent time in the hospital, she had several car accidents on her way to class (along with a flat tire or two), she had a bad case of mono (but was too sick to go see a doctor), her ex-boyfriend was stalking her, her dog was sick after eating her paper, her computer contracted numerous viruses that erased her hard drive, and the electric company would regularly turn off her power the night before exams. The only time this student would talk to the instructor was to give an excuse. She seldom asked about what she missed or what she would need to do to make up any assignments. Students who make excuses are usually not those who communicate for functional purposes. Those who communicate for functional purposes usually know the requirements for the class assignments and the deadlines or are seeking out this information.

Another reason students have for communicating with their instructors is to *participate*. Some classes tend to encourage interaction, while others actually discourage student involvement. In some classes, student participation is actually required. While the type of class and the instructor influence the quality and quantity of student interaction, another factor to consider is a student's motive to participate. When students believe that their classmates and instructors value their contributions, talking in class is a way of demonstrating that they are paying attention and are interested. Additionally, a way of showing understanding of the material is to be actively involved.

On the continuum of participation, there are the extremes. At one extreme, you have students who do not participate no matter what. These students could be rewarded for participating (i.e., given extra points or candy) or punished for not participating (i.e., receive a lower grade), and yet they do not participate. This is not to say that they are not interested or that learning is not taking place. In fact, these students may be communication apprehensive, a communication problem that was covered in Chapter 3. Others may have been socialized not to participate. These students learned early to merely listen and take notes. At the other extreme, there are the students who participate too much. Every class session, they have something to share with the class. Almost everyone has witnessed a student like this. Every time an instructor asks a question, the same people raise their hands (and maybe even make some noises and gestures in order to get called on). Class just is not class unless these students share their opinions with everyone else. Luckily, most students are not at the extremes. Many times students increase or decrease their participation depending on the instructor, the course, the content, and/or the format of the class.

The final motive that students have for communicating with their instructors is the motive of *sycophancy*. Sycophancy is a more polite way of saying "brown-nosing" or "sucking up." At times, students communicate with their instructors not because they like them or because they need any information about the course, but because they want to make a good impression. They want to appear as students who value and appreciate the instructor. This is not to say that students cannot compliment their instructors or acknowledge a job well done by their instructors. But when students make these statements just so they appear in

a more positive light in the eyes of their instructors, these students are communicating for the motive of sycophancy.

Some students work harder at making a good impression than spending time working on their assignments or studying for their exams. One student of ours once tried to explain his poor performance on an exam by stating that as he was preparing to study for the exam, he stumbled across a couple of research articles written by the instructor. Since the articles were so stimulating and significant, the student was unable to tear himself away from the articles, and thus was not able to study sufficiently for the exam (here we have a combination of excuse-making and sycophancy). While the instructor's head may have grown slightly bigger, the instructor was not impressed enough to allow any type of extra credit work to increase the student's grade. There is nothing wrong with students sharing positive feedback with their instructors, but if the praise is expected to be a substitute for competency and/or the sincerity of the praise remains questionable, then students are communicating for sycophantic rather than relational reasons.

It should be noted that the communication motives discussed here are not mutually exclusive. In other words, students may be motivated to communicate with their instructors for multiple reasons. While students may be predominantly motivated by one motive, such as functional, these students also communicate for the other motives as well. These communication motives are also not exhaustive. While students report that these are frequent reasons why they communicate with their instructors, students may also communicate with their instructors to obtain information about the instructor's area of study, to inquire whether a particular class serves as a prerequisite for others, to ask about college and/or university policy, or to inquire about other faculty in the instructor's department. The following section reviews some of the research findings yielded from a program of research examining students' motives for communicating with their instructors.

Research on Students' Motives

In 1999, we introduced our instrument for measuring motives students have for communicating with their instructors (see Box 4.1). Since then, we and our colleagues have conducted a series of studies to explore the relationship between students' motives and other variables. The following paragraphs review this research.

Our first study involved asking students why they communicate with their instructors (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999). Students generated a list of various reasons for why they communicate. This list of reasons was then given in questionnaire format to other students. For each of the reasons, students were asked to rate on a Likert-type scale, from *exactly like me* (5) to *not at all like me* (1) how each of the statements reflected their own reasons for talking to their instructors. Factor analysis resulted in identifying five motives that students report having:

relational, functional, participation, excuse-making, and sycophancy. For the five motives, students reported communicating most frequently for the functional motive, while communicating the least frequently for the relational motive.

In this study, we also examined the relationship between students' motives for communicating with their instructors with their interpersonal motives for communicating with others in general. Students who reported talking to others because it is fun, relaxing, and to show others that they care also reported that they talk to their instructors for the relational motive. Students who reported communicating with others out of a need for control stated that they talk more frequently to their instructors to satisfy excuse-making and sycophancy needs.

In our second study, we examined the relationship between students' motives for communicating with their instructors with affective and cognitive learning (Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 2000). We expected that the reason students talk to their teachers should be related to how well they like the course and the instructor. Our results did show that there was a relationship between affect and communication. Affect for the course was positively related to the relational, functional, and participation motives, while affect for the instructor was positively related to the relational and functional motives. Additionally, students' report of their cognitive learning was positively related to the motives of relational, functional, and participation motives. Seemingly, students are more communicatively active when they like the course and the instructor. Students also feel they are learning more when they are participating (i.e., communicating) more in class.

Our third study focused on how students' sociocommunicative orientations and instructors' sociocommunicate styles (see Chapter 9) influence the motives students have for communicating (Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 1999). Sociocommunicative orientations and styles are based on individuals' levels of assertiveness and responsiveness. When people report being both highly assertive and responsive, they are considered to be competent communicators. People who are assertive but not responsive are rated as aggressive; responsive but not assertive are regarded as being communicatively submissive. When people are neither assertive nor responsive, they are considered noncompetent.

In regard to sociocommunicative style, when students perceive their instructors as being competent or submissive, students report communicating for the functional motive. In other words, when students perceive their instructors as catering to the needs of others, they ask more questions about the material and assignments. Concerning their own sociocommunicative orientations, when students perceive themselves as being competent communicators, they report communicating more for the motives of relational, functional, participation, and excuse-making more so than students who perceive themselves as one of the other sociocommunicative orientations. Students high in responsiveness reported communicating more for sycophancy than students low in responsiveness. In this study, we also looked at whether men and women differed in their motives for communicating. Men reported communicating more for relational and sycophancy reasons while women reported communicating more for functional reasons. The results from this study indicate that while both student and instructor

communication characteristics influence why students communicate, student communication characteristics may play a greater role in influencing why students do or do not communicate with their instructors.

To better understand the role instructor behavior plays in influencing students' motives, the relationship between students' motives and instructors' use of behavior alteration techniques (BATs) was then investigated (Martin, Heisel, & Valencic, 2000). BATs are communication strategies that instructors use to influence students. Results from this study showed that nearly none of the BATs were related to the functional motive while nearly all of the BATs were related to the participation motive. Whether students communicated to find out information about the class did not seem to be related to the instructor's use of these techniques. On the other hand, whenever instructors used strategies to get students more involved in the classroom, students reported a greater motive to communicate to participate. Additionally, the relational motive was related to the instructors use of positive BATs while the excuse-making and sycophancy motives were related to the instructors use of negative BATs. When instructors used liking, rewarding, and confirming strategies, students reported communicating more for the relational motive. However, when instructors used strategies such as punishment, guilt, and legitimate authority, students reported communicating more for the excuse-making and sycophancy motives.

Further investigating the influence of instructor communication, we asked students to rate their instructors' communicator style and to report on their motives for communicating with their instructors (Myers, Mottet, & Martin, 2000). In this study, we found that when students perceived their instructors as impression-leaving, friendly, and contentious (i.e., argumentative), they communicated more for the relational motive. Similar to the results obtained in our third study, when students perceived their instructors as being friendly, they communicated more for functional motives. The animated, contentious, and friendly attributes predicted students' participation while the attentive and contentious attributes predicted students' use of excuse-making. Students also reported communicating more for sycophancy when the instructor was perceived as friendly and contentious.

In our most recent study, the relationship between students' trait communication apprehension and their motives for communicating was investigated (Martin, Valencic, & Heisel, 2000). We also included class motivation as a study variable. As one would expect, communication-apprehensive students talk less to their instructors, especially for the relational, functional, and participation motives. As far as motivation, when students are communicating for relational and participation motives, students report greater motivation about the class overall. Additionally, the motive of excuse-making is negatively related to motivation. When students have low motivation, they appear to also have a low need to explain their lack of attendance or failure in handing in work.

While these studies have explored students' motives, further work needs to be conducted to arrive at a better understanding of the role motives play in the classroom with the hope of improving the student-instructor relationship and

thus student learning. One area that we are paying more attention to now is why students do not talk to their instructors. The next section reviews several of the reasons students give for not talking to their instructors.

Why Students Do Not Talk to Their Instructors

Just as students have reasons for why they talk to instructors, students also have reasons for why they avoid or do not approach their instructors. If there is value in students communicating with their instructors as some of our research has indicated, we must also recognize why students do not communicate with their instructors. Based on this need, we asked a group of students to list five reasons why they personally do not talk to their instructors. We classified their responses into three categories: student characteristics, teacher characteristics, and environmental characteristics.

Student Characteristics

A primary reason students do not interact with instructors is based on their own communication apprehension. Not only are students afraid to communicate in general, but they are also afraid to communicate with someone of higher status who has power over them (i.e., grades). For some students, talking to a teacher is not even an idea that they would consider, let alone a behavior that they would do. Students also state that they are afraid of appearing ignorant. "What if I am asking the teacher about something she already said" and "What if I show how stupid I am by asking a dumb question" are examples that students gave for not interacting with their instructors.

Other reasons that students give for not communicating involve lack of affect and/or motivation. When students do not like the course or the instructor, they are less inclined to have a need to talk with the instructor. This reason for not communicating is consistent with the results we reported on earlier where students with greater affect for the course and instructor communicate more for the motives of relational, functional, and participation. Students also point to their own lack of motivation. When students do not care about the class, do not care about succeeding, and fail to attend class regularly, they also do not feel any need to communicate with their instructors.

One final reason students give for not communicating is the avoidance of being considered a teacher's pet. Students do not want to appear to be "kissing up" to the instructor. While some students clearly communicate with their instructors to make a favorable impression, (remember, students report communicating more frequently for sycophancy than for relational motives), some students would not consider being viewed as a person who is trying to make points or get special considerations via flattery or insincere comments.

Teacher Characteristics

Of the teacher characteristics that students listed as reasons for not communicating, a common theme among the responses was the instructor's lack of sensitivity and caring. When teachers do not appear interested in students, when teachers have a pattern of not showing respect towards students, and when teachers are verbally abusive towards students, students reply that they do not want to talk to their instructors. This makes sense. Why talk to someone who obviously does not care about you and who might respond to your attempt of communication by attacking you? We approach that which gives us pleasure, and we avoid that which gives us pain.

Another reason students give for not communicating with their instructors is the lack of feedback provided by the instructors. When students feel that previous attempts at communication have been unsuccessful, they are less likely to attempt to communicate with their instructors in the future. When attempts for help and clarification have failed in the past, students tend to look elsewhere (or possibly nowhere) for help, instead of talking to their instructors. In these instances, students have made an attempt to communicate with their instructors, but feel that the instructors are not overly interested or helpful. While not stated explicitly by students, there is the feeling that some students might generalize one bad experience with an instructor to all of their instructors. In other words, because one instructor was not helpful, students do not attempt to communicate with their other instructors in the future. Future research needs to explore the validity of this notion.

Environmental Characteristics

Students also mentioned several environmental characteristics that influence why they do not communicate with their instructors. One issue is time. Students state that they do not have enough time to communicate with their instructors. Because the class is not designed for student participation or because students have to go to a class immediately afterwards, there is no time to talk to their instructors. Students also report that lack of convenient office hours prevents them from communicating more frequently with their instructors. A final reason was that communicating with instructors was unnecessary. In explaining this last statement, students stated the class was easy enough and/or that the instructor's help or assistance was unnecessary. "I can succeed in this class without communicating with the instructor, so why bother?" was one common statement.

To better understand why students communicate with their instructors, we need to examine further the reasons why students do not communicate with their instructors. This is especially true if we are going to argue for the value of getting students to communicate with their instructors (i.e., for the motives of relational, functional, and participation). By examining the communication factors that repel students from teachers, we can enhance the factors that attract students to us, therefore improving the student-teacher relationship.

BOX 4.1

Motives	Scale Items
Relational	to learn about him/her personally so we can develop a friendship to build a personal relationship to learn more about the teacher personally because I find him/her interesting because we share common interests
Functional	to clarify the material to get assistance on the assignments/exams to learn how I can improve in the class to ask questions about the material to get academic advice to get more information on the requirements of the course
Participation	to appear involved in class because my input is vital for class discussion to demonstrate that I understand the material to demonstrate my intelligence because my classmates value my contribution to class discussions because my instructor values class participation
Excuse-Making	to explain why work is late to explain absences to explain why I do not have my work done to challenge a grade I received to explain why my work does not meet the instructor's expectations to explain the quality of my work
Sycophancy	to pretend I'm interested in the course to give the instructor the impression that I like him/her to give the impression that I think the instructor is an effective teacher to give the impression that I'm learning a lot from the instructor to give the impression that I'm interested in the course content to get special permission/privileges not granted to all students

Note: Students rate on a Likert-type scale, from *exactly like me* (5) to *not at all like me* (1) how each of the statements reflects their reasons for talking to their instructors.

Conclusion

No matter what class or subject matter one teaches, effective teaching and learning remain dependent on a teacher–student relationship grounded in communication. In this chapter, we discussed five motives that students have for communicating with their instructors. Whether a student communicates for one of these motives depends on student characteristics, instructor characteristics, and environmental characteristics. Of the five motives, three motives appear to be more advantageous in the classroom: relational, functional, and participation. These student motives are related to students' reports of their own learning and motivation. Seemingly then, students should be encouraged to communicate for these reasons. At the same time, instructors should appear responsive to the needs and concerns of their students, should refrain from being verbally aggressive, and should make themselves available for consultation.

The motives of excuse-making and sycophancy do not appear to be related to instructional outcomes. In other words, there is no relationship between these two motives and students' learning and motivation. While certain instructor behaviors may encourage students to communicate for excuse making and sycophancy reasons (e.g., when instructors use negative BATs), students are only responding to the demands of the instructor. If instructors dominate the classroom with legitimate authority and multiple rules, students will have to spend more time explaining why they broke the rules.

Many of the college instructors we know teach because they enjoy working with and nurturing students. This requires communication outside of merely providing a clear, insightful lecture. The instructional communication literature argues over and over again about the importance of establishing a positive relationship between the students in a class and the instructor. Beyond recognizing that students may communicate for different reasons in a given situation, instructors should also do their best to get their students to be actively involved and to provide a good, positive classroom experience.

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