3 Instructor Credibility

Scott A. Myers
West Virginia University

Matthew M. Martin
West Virginia University

Introduction

As Myers (2001) aptly stated, instructor credibility is one of the most important variables affecting the instructor-student relationship. Whether a K–12 teacher or a university professor, an organizational trainer, or a community consultant, credibility is an impression that all instructors must manage in order to achieve beneficial and relevant outcomes not only for themselves but also for their learners.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the instructor credibility construct. To begin, an overview of the instructor credibility construct is provided, followed by a brief review of the origins of the credibility construct. Several contemporary areas of instructor credibility research are then highlighted, and a new avenue for exploring instructor credibility is identified. The chapter concludes with four knowledge claims derived from the instructor credibility literature as well as several suggestions on how

the credibility research conducted to date can be applied to future teaching and research endeavors.

Overview of the Instructor Credibility Construct

Within the instructional communication context, instructor credibility is a perception that students make about the believability of any instructor. Although several conceptualizations of instructor credibility exist (e.g., McCroskey, Holdridge, & Toomb, 1974; McCroskey & Young, 1981; McGlone & Anderson, 1973), instructional communication researchers typically rely on McCroskey and Teven's (1999) three-dimensional typology, which consists of competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill. *Competence* refers to the extent to which students consider their instructors to be subject matter experts. *Trustworthiness* centers on the degree to which students believe their instructors possess integrity. *Goodwill* revolves around whether students perceive their instructors as being concerned about their welfare through the provision of empathy, understanding, and responsiveness (Teven & McCroskey, 1997). It should be noted that although some instructional communication researchers use the labels of character and caring instead of trustworthiness and goodwill, respectively, the two constructs (i.e., character and trustworthiness, caring and goodwill) reference the same conceptualization offered by McCroskey and Teven (1999).

Origins of the Instructor Credibility Research Program

Although the source credibility construct has been studied extensively since the days of early Greek and Roman philosophers and rhetorical scholars, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the study of the construct began in earnest by instructional communication scholars. This collective work led to a now-seminal study conducted by McCroskey et al. (1974) who identified five factors of source credibility attributed directly to college instructors: character (i.e., exhibiting trust), sociability (i.e., being good natured), composure (i.e., being relaxed), extroversion (i.e., being bold), and competence (i.e., demonstrating expertise). This was followed by McCroskey and Young (1981), whose work reduced the number of factors from five to two: competence and character. Teven and McCroskey (1997) later identified a third factor labeled as caring. To confirm these three factors of instructor credibility (competence, character, and caring), McCroskey and Teven (1999) developed an 18-item Measure of Ethos/Credibility. Not only did this study reiterate the notion that instructor credibility is multidimensional, but also this measure has become the de facto instrument used for assessing credibility in the instructional context (see Figure 3.1).

Contemporary Research on Instructor Credibility

Historically, instructional communication researchers have probed the relationships that exist among instructor credibility, instructor behaviors, and student learning outcomes (Finn et al., 2009; Schrodt et al., 2009), but it is the relationship between instructor credibility and student learning outcomes that has garnered the most attention. Collectively, these researchers (both past and present) have concluded that when instructors are perceived as credible, students report gains in their affective and cognitive learning and state motivation (Finn &

FIGURE 3.1   Measure of Ethos/Credibility

Directions: Please indicate your impression of the person noted by circling the appropriate number between the pairs of adjectives. The closer the number is to an adjective, the more certain you are of your evaluation.

Person: _____

Competence

Intelligent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unintelligent
Untrained	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Trained
Inexpert	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Expert
Informed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Uninformed
Incompetent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Competent
Bright	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Stupid

Goodwill

Cares about me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Doesn't care about me
Untrained	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Trained
Self-centered	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Not self-centered
Concerned with me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unconcerned with me
Insensitive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Sensitive
Not understanding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Understanding

Trustworthiness

Honest	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Dishonest
Untrustworthy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Trustworthy
Honorable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Dishonorable
Moral	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Immoral
Unethical	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Ethical
Phony	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Genuine

Source: McCroskey, J. C., & Teven, J. J. (1999). Goodwill: A reexamination of the construct and its measurement. *Communication Monographs, 66,* 90–103. doi:10.1080/03637759909376464

Ledbetter, 2014; Frymier & Thompson, 1992; Johnson & Miller, 2002; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002; Teven & McCroskey, 1997); these findings hold true across cultures (e.g., United States, Kenya, Germany, China, Japan) as well (Johnson & Miller, 2002; Zhang, 2009, 2011). In addition to learning, contemporary research has examined how student perceptions of instructor credibility are linked to instructor demographic variables, structural classroom components, instructor in-class communication, and student communication behaviors.

Instructor Demographic Variables

Within the past two decades, researchers have demonstrated an interest in exploring the extent to which instructor demographics such as age, sex, race, and sexual orientation affect

student impressions of instructor credibility. Generally, although students are more likely to rate younger instructors as ideal (Edwards & Harwood, 2003), they do consider older instructors as more competent, trustworthy, and caring (Semlak & Pearson, 2008). Heimann and Turman (2010) found students rate female instructors higher in perceived competence, trustworthiness, and caring than male instructors at both the beginning and end of the semester, although these differences may depend upon the communication strategies male and female instructors use to build their classroom credibility (Wei & Hendrix, 2016). Glascock and Ruggiero (2006), however, discovered that neither instructor nor student sex influenced perceived instructor credibility; rather, they found instructor ethnicity affected perceptions of instructor competence and caring in that regardless of student ethnicity, students rated Caucasian instructors as being more competent and caring than Hispanic instructors. In terms of sexual orientation, Russ et al. (2002) reported that not only are heterosexual instructors rated by students as higher in both competence and character than gay instructors, but also students indicate that they learn more from heterosexual instructors than they do from gay instructors.

Structural Classroom Components

For some students, impressions of instructor credibility are based on structural components such as course format, fairness of course grades and classroom policies, technology use, or instructor teaching philosophy. In the basic communication course, Todd, Tillson, Cox, and Malinauskas (2000) found that the course format (i.e., mass lecture, self-contained) had no effect on student perceptions of instructor credibility. Whether instructors are regarded as fair with course grades or policies, however, does impact perceived instructor credibility. Chory (2007) explored the relationship between classroom distributive justice (i.e., fairness regarding expected course grades) and procedural justice (i.e., fairness regarding class scheduling, course policies, and grading processes) with instructor credibility. She found student perceptions of distributive justice was related positively with perceived instructor character and caring, whereas procedural justice was related positively with perceived instructor competence, character, and caring.

Witt (2004) reported that student impressions of instructor competence did not differ between students enrolled in courses with or without a supplemental website. Schrodt and his colleagues (Schrodt & Turman, 2005; Schrodt & Witt, 2006) discovered instructors are viewed as most competent when they engage in moderate technology use and most trustworthy and caring when they engage in minimal or moderate amounts of technology use. Furthermore, those instructors who encourage student use of technology in class are considered to be competent, possess character, and exhibit caring (Finn & Ledbetter, 2013). Brann, Edwards, and Myers (2005) reported that students rate instructors who embody a progressive teaching philosophy (i.e., instruction as collaboration with students) higher in both character and caring than instructors who embody a transmissive (i.e., instruction as information transfer) teaching philosophy. However, no significant difference in competence was found between the two philosophies.

Instructor In-Class Communication Behaviors

How instructors communicate with their students greatly influences whether students consider them credible. To date, researchers have concentrated their efforts on examining

whether instructor use of several rhetorical and relational communication behaviors is related to perceived instructor credibility. Topping the list are instructor communication behaviors of clarity, humor, confirmation, nonverbal immediacy, power, self-disclosure, and verbal aggressiveness.

Clarity and humor are two rhetorical communication behaviors instructors use to design their instructional messages. Schrodt et al. (2009) reported a positive relationship exists between instructor clarity and instructor credibility in a study of college students enrolled across four universities. Relatedly, instructors who speak at a moderate rate are perceived to be more credible than instructors who speak more slowly (Simonds, Meyer, Quinlan, & Hunt, 2006) as are instructors whose feedback is considered fair, useful, and memorable (Trad, Katt, & Miller, 2014; Trees, Kerssen-Griep, & Hess, 2009). Dunleavy (2006) found instructors high in humor orientation are rated by students as competent, caring, and having character. Similarly, Wrench and Punyanunt-Carter (2005) uncovered a significant relationship between graduate advisors' perceived use of humor and student ratings of their competence, trustworthiness, and caring.

Confirmation, nonverbal immediacy, and power are three relational communication behaviors instructors utilize when interacting with their students on an interpersonal level. Not surprising, instructor confirmation is related positively with instructor competence, trustworthiness, and caring (Schrodt & Finn, 2011; Schrodt et al., 2009). Similarly, when instructors engage in nonverbal immediacy, students associate them with higher levels of credibility (Johnson & Miller, 2002; Klebig, Goldonowicz, Mendes, Miller, & Katt, 2016; Mottet, Parker-Raley, Beebe, & Cunningham, 2007; Santilli, Miller, & Katt, 2011; Teven, 2001; Teven & Hanson, 2004). Moreover, Pogue and AhYun (2006) discovered students who rate instructors as high in both nonverbal immediacy and credibility report higher levels of affective learning and state motivation.

With regard to instructor power, Teven and Herring (2005) found that the three dimensions of instructor credibility are related differentially to the five power bases typically used by instructors. For instance, instructors regarded as competent are considered to use the expert, legitimate, and referent power bases, whereas instructors who are regarded as having character or being caring are thought to use reward, expert, and referent power bases. Pytlak and Houser (2014) discovered that graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who use the prosocial power bases (i.e., reward, expert, referent) are considered overall to be more credible as well as more competent, trustworthy, and caring than GTAs who resort to antisocial power bases (i.e., coercive, legitimate). They also reported GTA use of prosocial behavior alteration techniques was related positively to perceived competence; use of antisocial behavior alteration techniques was negatively related to their perceived competence, trustworthiness, and caring.

Aside from these rhetorical and relational behaviors, however, it is important to note that when instructors engage in self-disclosure, students will consider them to be credible. Schrodt (2013) discovered that when students regard their instructors' self-disclosure attempts to be both appropriate and relevant to the course content, instructors are perceived as competent, trustworthy, and caring. His findings corroborate earlier work conducted by Myers, Brann, and Members of COMM 600 (2009), who found that instructor credibility can be both established and enhanced by self-disclosure that is relevant to the students and course material. Klebig et al. (2016) further established that instructor credibility is indirectly related to negative instructor self-disclosure and positively related to relevant self-disclosure.

Conversely, instructor credibility can be damaged when students perceive their instructors engage in verbal aggressiveness. Not only are verbally aggressive instructors rated as possessing lower levels of competence, character, and caring (Finn & Ledbetter, 2014; Myers, 2001; Schrodt, 2003; Schrodt & Finn, 2011; Teven, 2001), but also they are believed to direct specific types of verbally aggressive messages (e.g., background attacks, ridicule, threats) toward their students (Myers, 2001). Similar findings have been obtained within the graduate advisor-advisee relationships (Wrench & Punyanunt-Carter, 2005). Furthermore, when instructors engage in offensive, indolent, or incompetent classroom misbehaviors, their perceived credibility decreases (Banfield, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006).

However, the negative effects of instructor verbal aggressiveness can be mitigated by instructor argumentativeness and nonverbal immediacy. Edward and Myers (2007) discovered that when instructors are simultaneously high in argumentativeness and low in verbal aggressiveness, students rate them higher in competence, character, and caring than instructors low in both argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, low in argumentativeness and high in verbal aggressiveness, and are high in both argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness. Mazer and Stowe (2016) reported instructors who use high levels of nonverbal immediacy in the absence of verbal aggressiveness are rated higher in competence, trustworthiness, and caring than those who use nonverbal immediacy in the presence of verbal aggressiveness.

Student Communication Behaviors

Although lesser studied, researchers have also explored the contributions student communication behaviors, in and out of the classroom, add to the credibility literature. Generally, they have established that when instructors are perceived as credible, students are more involved in the instructional process. Although instructor credibility may or may not be associated with student self-reports of in-class participation (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009; Myers et al., 2009), student willingness to talk in class and their motivation to obtain functional information is related positively to perceived instructor character and caring (Myers, 2004; Myers & Huebner, 2011). Students also report that when they feel understood by, and have respect for, their instructors, they consider them to be credible (Martinez-Egger & Powers, 2007; Schrodt & Finn, 2011). Conversely, student misbehavior can be attributed to a lack of perceived instructor credibility. Klebig et al. (2016) discovered a negative link among perceived instructor competence, trustworthiness, and caring and student incivility. Miller, Katt, Brown, and Sivo (2014) reported instructor credibility fully mediates the relationship between instructor nonverbal immediacy and student incivility but only partially mediates the relationship between instructor use of negative self-disclosure and student incivility.

Outside of the classroom, instructor credibility also influences whether students choose to communicate with instructors. Myers (2004) reported that student out-of-class communication (OCC) is related positively to instructor competence, character, and caring, whereas Jones and Schrodt (2012) discovered instructors are perceived as highly competent, trustworthy, and caring when they provide highly supportive out-of-class messages to their students. Furthermore, students not only indicate a positive association between both

perceived instructor competence and trustworthiness and satisfaction with OCC, but also they are more likely to visit their instructors outside of class about personal, course-related, and general academic issues (Nadler & Nadler, 2001).

A New Avenue for Studying Instructor Credibility

An increase in the use of computer-mediated communication between instructors and students has created a new avenue for the study of instructor credibility. Whether students are viewing instructors' Facebook pages, reviewing websites to gather impressions of prospective instructors, or reviewing an instructor's Twitter account, computer-mediated communication is another mode through which students can assess instructor credibility.

Having a Facebook account does not damage instructor credibility (Hutchens & Hayes, 2014); rather, it is the content disclosed on the page that can prove problematic. Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds (2008) examined students' perceptions of an instructor's hypothetical Facebook page and found that an instructor whose Facebook page contained high levels of self-disclosure (e.g., photos with family members and friends, posts about favorite books, relationship status) was rated higher in competence, trustworthiness, and caring by students than those with low self-disclosure (e.g., face photo, job information). Coffelt, Strayhorn, and Tillson (2014) asked students to review an instructor's real Facebook page and discovered that when self-disclosure was relevant and negative, students rated them lower in credibility. Additionally, DiVerniero and Hosek (2011) found that students viewed online profiles to help them understand their instructors lives outside of class; however, students also desired that instructors remain in an idealized and professional state online by not revealing anything on a profile that would damage their credibility or change the way students thought of them. Furthermore, Coffelt et al. reported that although instructor in-class self-disclosure occurred more frequently, was considered more relevant, and was rated more positive than instructor Facebook self-disclosure, in-class credibility was highly correlated with Facebook credibility.

Word-of-mouth (WOM) communication as conveyed through RateMyProfessors.com (RMP) website also impacts instructor credibility. Instructors who receive positive WOM via student RMP ratings are rated higher in competence, character, and caring than negative WOM via student RMP ratings (Edwards, Edwards, Qing, & Wahl, 2007), a finding later replicated by Edwards and Edwards (2013). Liang (2015) discovered that when instructors respond to negatively valenced RMP ratings with a trustworthiness statement, student lower level cognitive learning increases. He also found that student likelihood to enroll in a future course with similar content increases if the instructor response includes any statement of credibility, whether it be competence, trustworthiness, or caring.

DeGroot, Young, and VanSlette (2015) investigated whether instructors' hypothetical use of Twitter influences student perceptions of their credibility, particularly if students are Twitter users themselves. Students rated instructors with professional (i.e., teaching, research) Twitter feeds as higher in competence, trustworthiness, and caring than instructors with social (i.e., personal information) Twitter feeds; instructors with blended (i.e., a mix of professional and personal) Twitter feeds were rated higher in trustworthiness than those with social Twitter feeds. Moreover, although students who believe it is a good idea for

these hypothetical instructors to have and use a Twitter account rated them higher in credibility, whether students themselves use Twitter has no bearing on perceptions of instructor credibility.

Knowledge Claims

1. Instructor credibility consists of three dimensions: competence, trustworthiness (or character), and goodwill (or caring). Of these dimensions, students consider caring to be the most important (Teven, 2007).
2. Being perceived as credible is vital for student learning. Students are less likely to report affect toward instructor course content or recommended course behaviors if they rate instructors low in credibility. They also report less cognitive learning and less motivation to study, participate in class, or communicate with instructors outside of scheduled class time.
3. Instructors who utilize technology (e.g., PowerPoint, learning management systems, social networking sites) in the classroom may consider that how and why they use it can influence the extent to which students consider them competent, trustworthy, and caring. To sustain credibility, instructors are advised to use either minimal or moderate amounts of technology.
4. Instructors who pay attention to the positive and prosocial communication behaviors they use in class should be perceived as credible by their students. These behaviors include, among others, clarity, humor, immediacy, confirmation, and power. To prevent damage to their credibility, instructors should avoid engaging in verbal aggressiveness and misbehaviors.

Teaching Communication Practices: Theory at Work

1. It often is said that while it takes time for instructors to build classroom credibility, it takes only a brief moment for credibility to be damaged or destroyed. Are their detrimental behaviors that you engage in that could irreparably destroy your credibility? How can you work on rebuilding credibility?
2. Online education is becoming more popular in high school, higher education, and professional continuing education settings. How might instructor credibility be perceived differently in an online course? Two online behaviors that play a major role in how students view instructors are timeliness and presence. Are timeliness and presence unique dimensions of online instructor credibility, or are these two behaviors subsumed under the dimensions of competence, character, and caring?
3. To what extent does students' attitude homophily with their instructors affect perceived instructor credibility? Students often face instructors who are different from them; what happens when instructors hold attitudes and beliefs that vary greatly from their students?
4. What are hurdles young instructors might encounter when building and maintaining credibility with their students? Could mature instructors suffer in their perceived credibility if students do not view them as being current with technology and popular culture?

Instructional Communication Research Practices

Although the study of instructor credibility has enjoyed a healthy existence, other avenues exist that researchers might consider taking to further explore the role instructor credibility plays in the college classroom. These avenues include the following:

1. Much of the research conducted to date has focused on the oral component of class instruction; that is, the communication behaviors and strategies instructors use not only to facilitate effective instruction but also to establish and enhance their credibility. Researchers should consider exploring how instructors establish and enhance their credibility through written feedback, which includes things such as the creation of course assignments, the use of grading rubrics, and the comments on papers and exams. Most recently, Gardner, Anderson, and Wolvin (2016) reported through comments written on grading rubrics, instructors can foster goodwill and use context-specific language. This assists students in their learning and provides another way for instructors to substantiate their credibility.

2. Grasping a more comprehensive understanding of how instructor race and ethnicity factors into student perceptions of instructor credibility is warranted. With few exceptions (i.e., Hendrix, 1997, 1998; Patton, 1999), instructor race and ethnicity have largely been ignored in research on instructor credibility in the American college classroom. As classes become more heterogonous, it is important instructional communication research practices mirror this movement.

3. The study of instructor credibility should not be restricted solely to the college classroom. Any context in which teaching occurs is ripe with opportunity for researchers to apply the credibility construct. On college campuses, these contexts include academic advising, coaching, mentoring, and tutoring; outside of higher education, contexts include vocational training, organizational consulting, and volunteering. Arguing priests play a teaching role, Horan and Raposo (2013) explored links among perceived credibility, nonverbal immediacy, and sociocommunicative orientation with parishioners located within a Catholic Diocese. They found priest credibility was positively related to priest nonverbal immediacy and responsiveness. It is possible that similar findings might be obtained in other learning contexts, which should be pursued.

4. Aside from the three credibility dimensions identified by McCroskey and Teven (1999), are there other dimensions that have yet to be identified? Myers and Bryant (2004) asked college students to list behaviors they considered to constitute instructor competence, character, and caring. Among the behaviors students listed were clarity (i.e., competence), verbal and nonverbal immediacy (i.e., character), and confirmation (i.e., caring), all of which are considered to be effective teaching behaviors. It is possible that when it comes to classroom instruction, the extent to which students consider their instructors believable also can be applied to specific instructional communication behaviors instructors use.

5. Researchers have yet to focus on how instructor attitudes toward teaching or working in general can influence student perceptions of instructor credibility. One exception is Zhang and Sapp (2009), who found that students who rate instructors as high in burnout consider them to be less credible than instructors low in burnout. Organizational outcomes (e.g., job productivity, job and teaching satisfaction, work alienation) represent an untapped area for future research.

Additional Readings

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Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to review the instructor credibility construct. An overview of the instructor credibility construct was provided, followed by a brief review of the origins of the credibility construct. Several contemporary areas of instructor credibility research were highlighted and a new avenue to explore instructor credibility was identified. This chapter concluded with four knowledge claims derived from the instructor credibility literature as well as several suggestions for how the credibility research conducted to date could be applied to future teaching and research endeavors. By being aware of the role credibility plays in the learning environment, instructors across all grade levels, content areas, and instructional settings should be able to enhance their learners' educational experience.

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