

## Teacher Communication in the Classroom

The body of research known as Teacher Immediacy Behaviors has grown substantially over the past 15 years. It represents interdisciplinary studies that connect the fields of education and communication. Over the past year we have had the opportunity to develop and facilitate workshops on teacher communication in the classroom for faculty and teaching aids in North Carolina and Virginia (VATE 2004), who work in elementary up through higher education classrooms. The workshops center on the connection between a teacher's immediacy behaviors and three key classroom issues—student affective and/or cognitive learning, students taking an interest in their own learning, and the decreasing of disruptive student behaviors. In doing so, we have come to know the positive power of this perceived closeness in the classroom.

Immediacy can be defined as “the degree of perceived physical or psychological closeness between people” (Richmond 2002, p. 68). While this closeness can be enhanced through both verbal and nonverbal communicative actions, this essay will focus on the nonverbal communication of teachers as it relates to the students' perception of closeness. Immediacy researchers have found that the major function of teachers' nonverbal behavior in the classroom is to improve students' affect or liking for the subject matter, teacher, and class, and to instill in them the desire to learn more about the subject matter (Richmond and McCroskey 2004). While teacher immediacy can be examined in varying ways, this article will look at the areas of teacher dress and appearance, gesture and movement, facial and eye

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behavior, the use of time, and finally, the classroom environment.

### Dress and Appearance

How a teacher dresses seems to be a popular question at many of the immediacy workshops we facilitate. The difficulty arises with young teachers and when an instructor of any age wishes to be perceived as both approachable and yet professional. Teachers who dress formally are perceived as being competent, organized, and knowledgeable about content, but teachers who dress casually can be perceived as friendly and outgoing. The key is to dress professionally but not to seem unapproachable and unreceptive to students' needs. The best advice for a teacher wishing to be perceived by the students as immediate is to dress formally for the first week or two of the school year until credibility has been established and then to dress more casually to show openness to student-teacher interactions. A teacher's dress must project the same message as the teacher's actions.

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## **Gestures and Movement**

As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words, so it is also important for a teacher to reflect on his or her actions. The more gestures and movement a teacher uses while explaining course concepts, the more excited he/she is perceived to be about the material being presented. Those instructors who use very few gestures and do not use the space of the entire classroom can be perceived as if they are transmitting simple messages regarding course/class material or are boring themselves.

One particular type of gesture that is perceived negatively is an adaptor. Adaptors can be described as hand and arm gestures that are distracting and often related to speaker nervousness. Examples of adaptors include habits such as the clicking of a pen, playing with hair, biting nails, or tapping fingers. If students observe their teachers using these behaviors, they will tend to misbehave more and may perceive their teachers as being anxious or bored.

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As with almost any type of behavior, some immediacy behaviors will appear more natural than others. Also, not everyone can be immediate in the same way. Immediacy can be enhanced through the use of natural gestures that make the presentations of course material more interesting and dynamic. Flailing arms will be perceived as distracting, and the teacher's credibility may be called into question.

Immediate teachers strive to use the entire classroom and do not plant themselves behind a desk, podium, large table, or technology work station. They walk around the teaching space in an effort to engage all of the students in the learning, and they are better able to monitor classroom behavior. A student will be less likely to misbehave if he/she knows that the teacher is walking around the room and encouraging active participation among the students. Whether standing behind a podium or while walking throughout the room, an immediate teacher maintains good posture and demonstrates an open posture—uncrossed arms and back positioned toward the wall and not toward the class—sending messages of approachability and friendliness. These behaviors make the teacher appear more receptive and closer to his/her students. Students' body positions can also be perceived similarly. If a student in class crosses his/her arms or turns his/her back away from a teacher, showing a closed body position, he/she can be perceived as bored or not interested in the course material.

## **Facial and Eye Behavior**

Our faces can be described as the windows to our souls. With this said, it is important to make sure that we as teachers are being perceived appropriately. Immediate teachers are careful not to maintain an unexpressive face and instead offer friendly facial expressions, positive head nods, and frequent smiles. These types of behaviors also decrease the number of student misbehaviors and allow students to feel more comfortable about participating in classroom discussion. Students will volunteer to talk because they will expect a positive or at least encouraging response from their teacher.

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The use of eye contact also contributes to the closeness perceived between a student and a teacher. The lack of eye contact by a teacher can be perceived as shyness or lack of interest in his/her students. Immediate teachers use eye contact to help students know when to ask questions, talk, or approach them. The use of eye contact by teachers also leads to better behaved students and a teacher who is perceived as more animated.

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The use of good eye contact also applies to the explanations of course content. Power Point slides and overheads should not be read verbatim. Immediate teachers only glance at slides and overheads while still maintaining eye contact with their students in the entire room and not just a few rows. The classroom walls and the tops of students' heads are not used as foci for immediate teachers. Instead, immediate teachers are not afraid to make direct eye contact with their students and look them directly in the eyes.

### **Time**

Time can be used for a variety of things by immediate teachers. Time can serve to reward students for demonstrating good behavior, to control a classroom, or as a way to make class more interesting. A variety of teaching methods and activities to teach course materials should be incorporated to apply to all learning styles and to increase the perceived closeness between the teacher and his/her students. Immediacy can also

be enhanced through setting aside time for previews of the material to be covered and reviews of what was covered in previous lessons, or as a way to sum up a particular day's lesson.

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Class arrival time is another important aspect of teacher immediacy, or perceived closeness. Older students will not take the class/course seriously if their teacher shows up late. Also, the students may start showing up late themselves. By increasing immediacy, prompt arrival time gives teachers the opportunity to interact with their students and get to know them on a personal level instead of just an academic level. Immediate teachers or those who understand the importance of early arrivals can better communicate with students who consistently arrive late than those teachers who mirror this late arrival behavior. It is important for leaders, in this case teachers, to demonstrate those particular classroom norms that they set.

### **Classroom Environment**

The environmental component of immediacy includes color, temperature, sound, seating arrangements, and lighting. Ugly environments yield hostile communication, whereas attractive classrooms are more likely to keep students and teachers attentive and more likely to reduce poor student behavior. It is difficult to establish and maintain immediacy when the teaching environment is too hot or too cold, not well

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luminated, painted a dingy or industrial color, or is unclean. Immediate teachers redecorate their rooms and adjust lighting to make the environment conducive to learning where possible. Immediate teachers arrange student desks or chairs and tables, depending on which type of interaction is needed for learning. Traditional row and column seating is useful for listening, note taking, and lecturing. Modular seating is useful in situations where students will interact in groups. Circular/horseshoe/open-square seating encourages student-teacher discussions. Immediate teachers use these different arrangements in different learning situations to improve student interest and overall communication between students and the teacher.

### **Conclusion**

Thanks to the work of Richmond and McCroskey (2004), numerous positive outcomes of teacher immediacy have been identified. Listed below are a few of these particular outcomes:

- Increases liking, affiliation, and positive affect on the part of the student
- Increases student affect for the subject matter, cognitive learning, and motivation to learn
- Enables a teacher to be perceived as a more competent communicator, one who listens and cares

- Offers teacher positive forms of behavior control
- Promotes higher evaluations from students and one's immediate supervisor
- Encourages students to demonstrate their knowledge and take responsibility for their own learning

A more detailed list of the outcomes can be found in the additional resources listed at the end of this essay. We cannot all be immediate in exactly the same way. Some of the teacher immediacy behaviors described in this essay may be easier to incorporate and more natural than others. For example, it may be easier to increase eye contact throughout the entire classroom than to walk among the aisles. Some of the environmental components related to immediacy are much more difficult to incorporate. When classroom environment components cannot be adjusted, the other immediacy categories discussed in this essay need to be applied with greater frequency to counter the negative effect the environment has on the students' perception of closeness, or immediacy.

As you prepare your lessons for the rest of the semester or year, think about these different ways to demonstrate an atmosphere of responsiveness, friendliness, and approachability between yourself and your students and about the positive outcomes related. We commend those of you who already use these behaviors and challenge you to consider ways of incorporating even more immediacy behaviors into your teaching. For those who are new to this body of research, we encourage you to consider which of these behaviors would be the most natural and appropriate for your teaching situations. We encourage you to keep in mind how these behaviors can improve students' in

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terest in their own learning and their affective and/or cognitive learning and how these behaviors can decrease the number of disruptive student behaviors.

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### Additional Readings

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