BUSINESS TEACHER IMMEDIACY AND STUDENTS' AFFECTIVE LEARNING: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PERCEIVED IMMEDIACY

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Abstract

Purpose: *The purpose of this study was to identify the influence of business teachers' communicative behaviors on students' affective learning, specifically their immediate behaviors.* ***Method:*** *Questionnaires were administered to 299 business students to assess their observations of their business professors' immediate behaviors, students' level of perceived immediacy with their professor, and students' affective learning in the class.* ***Results:*** *Ordinary least squares estimation was used to test a path model in which perceived immediacy mediated the relationships between teachers' immediate behaviors and each of the dimensions of affective learning (i.e., affinity towards content, affinity towards teacher, likelihood of studying the content again, and likelihood of studying with that professor again). The model was supported, reaffirming the anticipated positive relationship between teacher immediacy and affective learning, but newly identifying the need for perception checks in the classroom to encourage students' affective learning.*

Introduction

Instructor immediate behaviors are any communicative behaviors displayed by an instructor that causes students to perceive a reduction in psychological or physical distance with their instructor (Zhang & Witt, 2016). Instructor immediate behaviors are known to induce a plethora of desirable classroom outcomes for students, such as increased motivation (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1993; Hughes, 2014), decreased content anxiety (Ellis, 1995; Kelly, Rice, Wyatt, Ducking, & Denton, 2015; Williams, 2010), and increased satisfaction with the class (Arbaugh, 2001; Fusani, 1994; Hackman & Walker, 1990). Numerous studies have also identified a positive relationship between students' affective learning, which involves students' attitudes and feelings relevant to the classroom, and teacher immediacy behaviors (Andersen, 1979; Baker, 2010; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Hackman & Walker, 1990; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Rodríguez, Plax, & Kearny, 1996; Pogue & AhYun, 2006).

From 1965 until 2012, immediate behaviors were treated as a set of behaviors that could act as a checklist for inducing positive communicative outcomes. However, starting with Kelly (2012), there has been a shift in the literature to take a closer look at the role of immediate behaviors in communication by considering the way these behaviors are psychologically processed by message receivers. In

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short, there is a shift in the literature that now conceptualizes immediacy as a set of behaviors that induce cognitive processing and assessment of the message receiver, a process that results in perceived immediacy, which constitutes a new assessment of physical or psychological closeness. Though the literature has always defined immediate behaviors as those that induce a psychological change, only as of 2012 has the literature started assessing the cognitive change itself rather than treating immediate behaviors as direct influencers of associated outcomes. This distinction is very impactful for classroom literature; teacher immediacy behaviors may be more influential than previously suspected because the relationships observed are mediated rather than direct, as originally proposed. To date, the relationship between teacher immediacy behaviors and students' affective learning has not been re-examined as a potentially mediated relationship. As such, the present study sets forth to re-examine these relationships.

Affective Learning

The focus in education on assessment of student learning has emphasized the need for better understanding of affective learning. A student's *learning experience* is a combination of factors such as attitude toward school, socio-economic status, parental involvement, satisfaction with classes, teacher support, and perceived importance of the subject areas (Haladyna, Shaughnessy, & Olsen, 1980). Affective learning is a learner's positive emotional response to the learning experience (Hyland, 2011). According to the original concept used in Bloom's Taxonomy, affective learning involves having a positive attitude toward learning a subject (Bloom, 1956).

In a seminal study, McCroskey (1994) measured affective learning as a second-order, unidimensional construct with four sub-measures. The instrument was found to have strong reliability and predictive validity. The four constructs he used to capture affective learning are affect toward class content (content affect), taking future classes in the content area (content future), the instructor (instructor affect), and taking classes with the instructor in the future (instructor future). These affective learning constructs emphasize that there are influences of student motivation to learn the content from a specific teacher in a specific class, and whether the student would sustain these attitudes in the future. Because affective learning encompasses the interaction between student attitudes towards the class, teacher and the class environment, affective learning ultimately influences student learning and achievement in a class.

Teacher Immediate Behaviors

Immediacy was introduced as a construct by Mehrabian (1969) as a set of behaviors that "enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another" (p. 203). Mehrabian identified five immediate behaviors in the United States: "touching, distance, forward lean, eye contact, and orientation" (p. 203).

Additional immediate cues have been identified specifically for instructors in the face-to-face classroom, including using vocal inflection when teaching and having a relaxed body posture (McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, & Barraclough, 1995). Teacher immediacy behaviors were further expanded into the online classroom in 2011, when it was determined that computer-mediated behaviors such as addressing students by name in email and responding to messages quickly were further perceived to be immediate behaviors by online learners (Kelly & Fall, 2011).

Teacher immediacy embodies a synthesis of verbal, nonverbal, and computer-mediated communication behaviors, often in combination, to communicate relationally with another (Christen, Kelly, Fall, & Snyder, 2015; Kelly & Fall, 2011; Witt & Wheeless, 2001). Nonverbal immediacy incorporates approach behaviors that engender perceptions of interpersonal closeness and warmth, creating an engaging environment for the student-teacher relationship (Andersen & Andersen, 1982; McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; Kearney, Plax, & Wendt-Wasco, 1985). Hence, teachers who demonstrate immediate behaviors stimulate students through vivid illustrations, direct attention to the content, and produce more student learning and student enrollment (Andersen, 1986; McCroskey & Richmond, 1992). Students observe or comply with the wishes of immediate behaviors because the perception of immediacy generates more respect, affect, or liking power (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000).

Perceived Immediacy

Not all teacher communicative behaviors reduce students' perceived psychological distance, though. For example, according to pre-2012 immediacy literature, giving a student eye contact should always reduce their perceived dissonance with their instructor, even if that eye contact is perceived by the student to be a staredown (Kelly et al., 2015). These behaviors that reduce comfort and increase dissonance between students and teachers are non-immediate behaviors (McCroskey, Sallinen, Fayer, Richmond, & Barraclough, 2009).

This consideration for how behaviors are perceived is particularly important when considering how the meaning of behaviors is interpreted differently across cultures (Kelly, 2012; McCroskey et al., 2009). Much additional research has been performed since Mehrabian's original work, especially in context of multi-cultural and situational immediacy cues. Efforts to identify instructional immediacy in the non-U.S. classroom have taken place in Australia and Finland (McCroskey, Sallinen, Fayer, Richmond, & Barraclough, 1996), Japan (Khoo, 2014; Neuliep, 1997), Germany (Roach & Byrne, 2001), Kenya (Johnson & Miller, 2002), and China (Myers, Zhong, & Guan, 1998; Zhang, 2005).

When students make psychological judgments about instructors' communicative behaviors, they are not selectively looking at only the behaviors that make them feel good but rather all behaviors displayed simultaneously. When they perceive

all of these behaviors and assess anew how they feel about their instructor in light of those behaviors, this new assessment is perceived immediacy, an evaluation of perceived psychological distance. [Notably, perceived immediacy has also been called *generalized immediacy* (Andersen, Andersen, & Jensen, 1979) and *psychological response to immediacy* (Kelly et al., 2015).] Perceived immediacy is theorized to be a constant, mediating variable between senders' messages and receivers' responses to those messages, whether the context be interpersonal (Kelly, 2012); workplace (Kelly & Autman, 2014; Kelly & Westerman, 2014), or instructional (Bublitz, 2016; Hughes, 2014; Kelly et al., 2015).

Rationale

The primary function of teachers' nonverbal behavior is to facilitate learning and increase students' affect for the subject content, course and teacher, and to improve desire to learn (McCorksey, 1992; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). Though previous research in immediate behaviors and affective learning has provided insight into the communication process in educational settings, there is a gap in these studies. What if a student perceives what the teacher intends to be a positive, immediate behavior as a negative behavior? For example, teachers may stand too close because they are relaxed (immediate behavior), but this makes students uncomfortable or intimidated (non-immediate behavior). In this case, the immediate behavior is having a negative effect on the teacher-student relationship. Thus, there is a construct of perceived immediacy that has been missing from prior studies which accounts for not just the category or intention of behavior, but how those behaviors are perceived. As such, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H_1: Instructor immediate behaviors will positively correlate with perceived immediacy.

H_2: Perceived immediacy will positively correlate with affect toward the content.

H_3: Perceived immediacy will positively correlate with intention of taking another class of the same content.

H_4: Perceived immediacy will positively correlate with affect toward the instructor.

H_5: Perceived immediacy will positively correlate with intention to take another class with the same instructor.

The path model created by these hypotheses is portrayed in Figure 1.

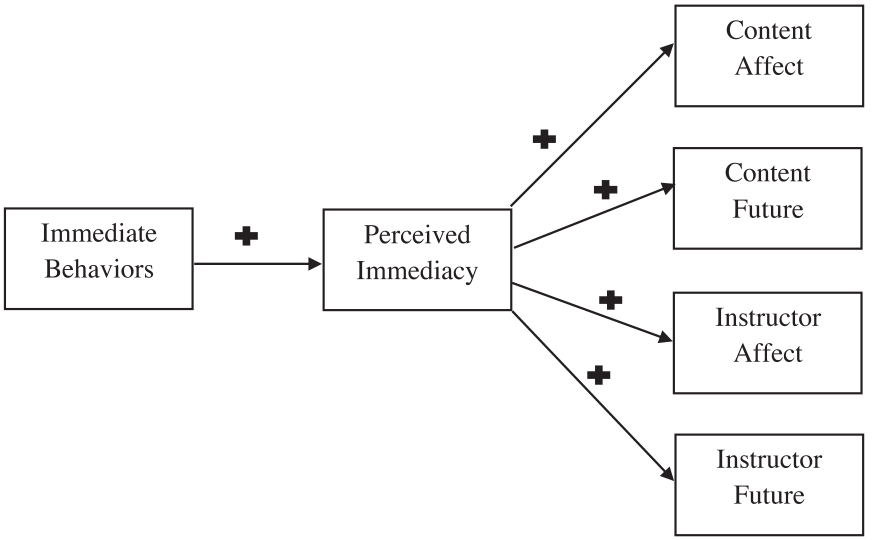

Figure 1: Hypothesized Path Model.

Method

The following sections explicate data collection for this study. IRB approval was gained before data collection began.

Subjects

Subjects were recruited from eight introductory business communication courses, two introductory business technology courses, and two upper-division business electives at a moderate-sized southeastern university. The communication course was required for all business majors at the university, the technology course was recommended for all business majors, and the upper-division elective was recommended or required for all business majors. Because these courses were integral to business majors across multiple business departments, students enrolled in these courses were likely to be enrolled in a wide variety of business courses at the time the assessment was completed, meaning they could respond in regard to a wide variety of business professors. Of 299 students who participated, 148 were male, 148 were female, and three did not identify their sex. Additionally, there were 37 freshmen, 103 sophomores, 73 juniors, 79 seniors, and 7 chose not to identify their classification. Further, 64 students were classified as non-traditional, and 235 were classified as traditional. The average age of subjects was 24 (SD = 7.82).

Procedure

A URL link to an online survey was sent to teachers of relevant business courses accompanied by a request that they share the questionnaire link with their students. All solicited instructors agreed. The questionnaire began with an informed consent asking that students think of one of the business professors with which they were taking a class this semester while completing the questionnaire, preferably not the professor who distributed the link to them. This allowed the questionnaire to reflect upon a variety of business professors rather than just the professors who distributed the survey. On average, students needed 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all measures.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Measure	Mean	S.D.	Min.-Max.	Skew	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α
Content Affect	5.86	1.21	1.00-7.00	−.83	−.19	.89
Content Future	5.70	1.34	1.00-7.00	−.83	−.08	.92
Instructor Affect	6.01	1.31	1.00-7.00	−1.26	.99	.93
Instructor Future	5.89	1.53	1.00-7.00	−1.38	1.31	.96
Immediate Behaviors	5.17	1.01	2.78-7.00	.02	−1.01	.83
Perceived Immediacy	5.69	1.24	1.00-7.00	−.84	.40	.96

Instrumentation

Instructional immediate behaviors, perceived immediacy, and affective learning were each assessed using three distinct measures.

Instructional immediate behaviors. Immediate behaviors were assessed using the condensed version of McCroskey et al.'s (1995) Revised Nonverbal Immediacy Scale. The measure is composed of nine Likert-type items with each response scale ranging from *Disagree Strongly* to *Agree Strongly*. The measure is reported to have strong concurrent and discriminant validity.

Perceived immediacy. Kelly's (2012) 14-item semantic differential measure was used to assess perceived immediacy. The measure is reported to have strong discriminant, concurrent, and content validity.

Affective learning. McCroskey's (1994) second-order unidimensional affective learning measure was used. The measure has four sub-measures that can be used independently: (a) affect for content, (b) intention to study the content in the future, (c) affect for the instructor, and (d) intention to take a class with the instructor again. Each sub-measure is composed of four semantic differential items. The measure is reported to have strong content validity.

Results

Analyses for this study consists of two parts. First, the individual hypotheses must be tested. Then, the model can be tested. Notably, all correlations, both observed and corrected for attenuation due to measurement error, are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Correlation Matrix

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6
Content Affect		.85*	.81*	.73*	.55*	.80*
Content Future	.93*		.73*	.76*	.47*	.71*
Instructor Affect	.89*	.79*		.89*	.52*	.80*
Instructor Future	.79*	.81*	.94*		.47*	.71*
Immediate Behaviors	.64*	.53*	.59*	.53*		.60*
Perceived Immediacy	.86*	.75*	.85*	.73*	.67*	

*p < .05
Uncorrected correlations above the diagonal
Corrected correlations below the diagonal

Hypothesis Testing

The first hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between the teacher's immediate behaviors and perceived immediacy. This hypothesis was tested using Pearson correlation. Data supported a positive relationship [$r = .60$, $p < .05$; corrected for attenuation due to measurement error ($\acute{r}$) $\acute{r} = .67$, $p < .05$].

The second hypothesis predicted that perceived immediacy and affect for the content would be positively related. This hypothesis was tested with a Pearson correlation. Data supported a positive relationship [$r = .80$, $p < .05$; $\acute{r} = .86$, $p < .05$].

The third hypothesis predicted that perceived immediacy and intention to study the content in the future would be positively related. This hypothesis was tested with a Pearson correlation. Data supported a positive relationship [$r = .71$, $p < .05$; $\acute{r} = .75$, $p < .05$].

The fourth hypothesis predicted that perceived immediacy and affect for the instructor would be positively related. This hypothesis was tested with a Pearson correlation. Data supported a positive relationship [$r = .80$, $p < .05$; $\acute{r} = .85$, $p < .05$].

The fifth hypothesis predicted that perceived immediacy and intention to take a class with the instructor again would be positively related. This hypothesis was tested with a Pearson correlation. Data supported a positive relationship [$r = .71$, $p < .05$; $\acute{r} = .73$, $p < .05$].

Model Test

Immediate behaviors were predicted to induce perceived immediacy, which would in turn induce the four dimensions of affective learning. This gives the model one mediating variable. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimation was used to estimate the path coefficients (Boster, 2003; Kelloway, 1995). OLS was chosen to test the model because it is more conservative than structural equation modeling (SEM). Unlike SEM, OLS allows the model to be tested with both corrected and uncorrected path coefficients. Testing the model fit first without correction for attenuation due to measurement ensures that model fit results are not a product of Type 1 error.

Importantly, both direct and indirect effects were statistically significant for the model. The observed relationship between immediate behaviors and affect for the content ($r = .55$) is within sampling error of the predicted relationship [$r = .48$; $P(.38 \leq \rho \leq .65) = .95$]. The observed relationship between immediate behaviors and affect for the instructor ($r = .52$) is within sampling error of the predicted relationship [$r = .48$; $P(.38 \leq \rho \leq .56) = .95$]. The observed relationship between immediate behaviors and intention to study the content in the future ($r = .47$) is within sampling error of the predicted relationship [$r = .48$; $P(.33 \leq \rho \leq .52) = .95$]. The observed relationship between immediate behaviors and intention to take class with the instructor again in the future ($r = .47$) is within sampling error of the predicted relationship [$r = .43$; $P(.33 \leq \rho \leq .52) = .95$]. As such, the observed data are consistent with the predicted model.

Next, the model was re-tested with corrected effects. The observed relationship between immediate behaviors and affect for the content ($\acute{r} = .64$) is within sampling error of the predicted relationship [$r = .58$; $P(.50 \leq \rho \leq .65) = .95$]. The observed relationship between immediate behaviors and affect for the instructor ($\acute{r} = .59$) is within sampling error of the predicted relationship [$r = .57$; $P(.49 \leq \rho \leq .64) = .95$]. The observed relationship between immediate behaviors and intention to study the content in the future ($\acute{r} = .53$) is within sampling error of the predicted relationship [$r = .50$; $P(.41 \leq \rho \leq .58) = .95$]. The observed relationship between immediate behaviors and intention to take a class with the instructor again in the future ($\acute{r} = .53$) is within sampling error of the predicted relationship [$r = .49$; $P(.40 \leq \rho \leq .57) = .95$]. Thus, the model also fits well when effects are corrected for attenuation due to measurement error. These path coefficients are depicted in Figure 2.

Discussion

As anticipated, the path model was supported by the data, indicating that perceived immediacy did indeed mediate immediate behaviors and each of the four dimensions of affective learning. This means that immediate behaviors have a more substantial effect on affective learning than previously credited in the literature. As explained by Kelly et al. (2015), immediate behaviors were found

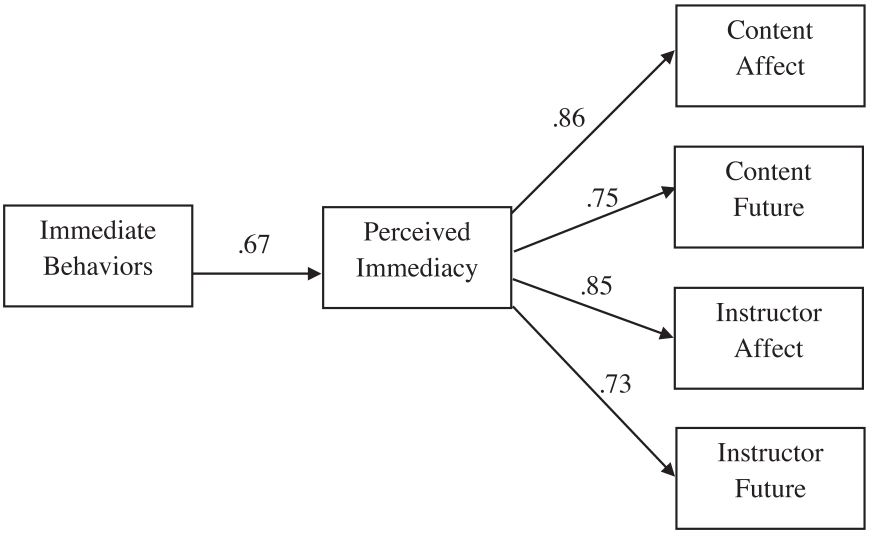

Figure 2: The Observed Path Model.

to have an indirect effect rather than a direct effect, which indicates that previous literature has only given immediate behaviors credit for square impact they truly exhibit within the classroom. Note that because effect sizes range in magnitude from 0 to 1, square of the effect is the same as being credited for the square root of the variance if effects were calculated with whole numbers, which is a substantial difference. For example, in the present study, immediate behaviors would have been credited on average for 25% of the variance in affective learning, whereas the mediated model shows that it accounts for closer to 50% of the variance. This shows that immediate behaviors are substantively important in shaping students' attitudes toward a class.

Implications for Instructors

As expressed by Kelly et al., (2015), Kelly and Autman (2014), and Kelly and Westerman (2016), instructors can no longer treat the instructional immediate behaviors like a checklist of behaviors with confidence that attempting to exhibit these behaviors will automatically induce positive classroom outcomes. Instructors must make assessments of how students perceive these behaviors. Using assessments such as McCroskey's (1995) instructor immediate behaviors inventory and Kelly's (2012) perceived immediacy assessment can help instructors understand whether their behaviors are being perceived as intended. However, instructors should be cautioned to ensure that they do not attach student identities to their assessments because students will not be free to respond honestly if their answers can be identified for fear of influencing their grades. Instructors

may benefit from having a third party, perhaps a colleague in their department, administer such assessments.

Affective learning is not traditionally measured as a part of assessment purposes in class settings. If instructors plan to influence students' affect so that learning and engagement occur more readily, then affect should be measured in some way. In the health sciences area, affective outcomes are being openly measured to ensure that students achieve appropriate caring attitudes that will promote better patient care (Shephard, 2007). If instructors do not want to assess affective learning directly, at a minimum they can assess their immediate behaviors and perceived immediacy, having confidence that these assessments predict their students' affective learning.

Conclusion

Instructional immediacy in face-to-face classrooms offers benefits to both the instructor, reflected in appropriately behaved learners, and the student by increasing their affective learning (Andersen, 1979; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Hackman & Walker, 1990; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986). To ensure that optimal affective learning is happening in the classroom, business instructors must be aware of their behaviors and ensure that they are perceived to be immediate with their students.

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