

The Association Between Immediacy and Socio-Communicative Style

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The very strong association of immediacy with positive instructional outcomes has led some to question whether teacher immediacy amounts to anything more than being responsive with students. The present study demonstrates that a measure of teacher immediacy is strongly associated with the Socio-Communicative Style of the teacher—both the assertiveness and the responsiveness components. It is concluded that it is theoretically justified to teach pre-service or in-service teachers to engage in immediate behaviors as means of increasing their communication competence and probably teaching effectiveness. The impact of immediacy observed in the classroom environment is seen as likely to be generalizable to other communication contexts.

Since its introduction to the literature in instructional communication by Andersen (1978; 1979), the concept of "immediacy" has received considerable attention. After reviewing the research in this area, McCroskey and Richmond concluded ". . . it appears that teacher immediacy may be one of the most critical variables in determining teacher effectiveness" (1992, p. 118).

In an earlier critique of the immediacy research in the instructional context, however, McCroskey (1984) raised a question as to whether operationalizations of immediacy in this context amounted to anything more than measuring whether a teacher was being responsive to students. Essentially, he suggested that the early findings related to immediacy may simply be artifacts of inappropriate measurement. As he indicated in that critique, learning that teachers who are responsive with their students produce more cognitive and affective learning than teachers who are not as responsive is important, but if immediacy is simply a construct which is redundant with responsiveness it provides no theoretical advancement. While his criticism was directed primarily toward the use of the Generalized Immediacy Scale (Andersen, 1979), the point he made has general implications for immediacy research.

We certainly do not mean to derogate teachers who are responsive with their students. Our concern is that the theory underlying the construct of immediacy purports to be something more than responsiveness. The theory revolves around psychological closeness, based on physical closeness and verbal and nonverbal metaphorical substitutes for such physical closeness. This psychological orientation presumably opens interactants to reception of communicative messages from each other.

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The construct of immediacy was introduced by Mehrabian (1969, p. 213) who used this term to refer to those communication behaviors which "enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another." Mehrabian later advanced the "immediacy principle." This principle states that "People are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer" (1971, p. 1). Thus, the assumption is that people who like us (and want to be nice to us) will be more immediate with us. Thus, when people are immediate with us, we will develop positive affect for those people.

The presupposition is that being immediate is something beyond just being physically close. We also presume that it is possible to be close without being responsive to another person. Mehrabian clearly believes this can be done, and illustrates his belief by noting that when two people are physically fighting they are physically close, but it would not be appropriate to think of this as the same as being either immediate or responsive.

It also would seem quite possible to be immediate and close without being responsive. The primary case where this would be presumed to be so would be in highly assertive contexts. Assertiveness often involves nonverbal behaviors which increase physical and/or psychological closeness--direct eye contact, direct body position, moving physically closer, gesturing towards another, raising voice to be heard, having more vocal variety. In short, these immediacy behaviors may be used to indicate assertiveness as well as responsiveness in an interaction.

The present study sought to obtain empirical verification that measuring immediacy in an applied context (a college classroom) taps into behavior that involves something more than simply responsiveness. We hypothesized positive relationships between immediacy and both assertiveness and responsiveness.

Personality and Nonverbal Behavior

Although Mehrabian has acknowledged the possibility that some verbal behaviors may also contribute to perceptions of immediacy, the construct is primarily concerned with nonverbal behavior. Writers in the nonverbal arena consistently stress that much, if not most, human nonverbal behavior is beyond conscious control. There are too many nonverbal variables in operation at any given time for a person to be fully in control of all of them. Hence, while a person may strategically control some nonverbal behaviors in an effort to communicate certain things, some (if not most) accompanying nonverbal behavior probably will not be controlled. Some refer to this unintentionally communicative messages as "leakage."

Nonverbal immediacy behaviors, then, like most other nonverbal behaviors are "controlled" primarily by non-conscious aspects of the individual's personality. The person's nonverbal behavior may be expected to reflect that personality. Our nonverbal behaviors will reflect our inner orientations, even if we are not fully aware they are doing so. These orientations may be genetically formed, a function of conditioning and/or habit, or any possible combination of these causal factors.

The idea that personality has a major impact on communication behavior, of course, is not new. The impact of personality on communication behavior has been clearly demonstrated (McCroskey & Daly, 1987). Similarly, it has been established that individuals exhibit trait-like differences in their basic communication styles (Norton, 1983). These styles also have been examined under such labels as "personal style" (Merrill & Reid, 1981), "social style" (Lashbrook, 1974), and "psychological androgyny" (Bern, 1974; Wheelless & Dierks-Stewart, 1981). All of these approaches are rooted in Jungian psychology and are represented in the very popular Myers-Briggs personality inventory.

These style-based approaches characteristically suggest two or more dimensions to the individual's style which are assumed to result in differential communication behaviors. These behaviors are presumed to communicate distinctive impressions of the individual to others, what we

have chosen to refer to as their "Socio-Communicative Style." It is presumed that observers can gain insight into the personality of individuals by taking note of their characteristic communication behaviors. The two most commonly referenced dimensions of Socio-Communicative Style are "assertiveness" (called masculinity by Bem) and "responsiveness" (called femininity by Bem). Assertiveness is characterized by descriptors such as independent, dominant, aggressive, competitive, and forceful. Responsiveness is characterized by descriptors such as helpful, sympathetic, compassionate, sincere, and friendly.

McCroskey, Richmond, and Stewart (1986) have drawn from this body of research to suggest that assertiveness and responsiveness are two of the three critical components of interpersonal communication competence (p. 282). Thus, if immediacy is as powerful a factor as the research in instruction indicates, and McCroskey et. al's analysis is correct, both the assertiveness trait and the responsiveness trait should be highly associated with an individual's immediacy behavior. The present study tested that assumption. A contrasting assumption, that immediacy is a redundant construct, would predict a strong association between immediacy and responsiveness, but a weak or non-existent association with assertiveness. This study provides a test of that assumption as well.

If immediacy theory and the style-based theory of communicative competence are correct, teachers who engage in the specific behaviors which have been described as immediate should be seen as more communicatively competent (both more assertive and more responsive). However, if students see immediate behaviors as simply attempts at being responsive, it is likely they will see the teacher as more responsive, but not more assertive, and possibly even *less* assertive.

METHOD

A total of 230 undergraduate students enrolled in non-performance introductory communication courses designed to meet general education requirements participated in this study. Students completed a behaviorally oriented measure of their teacher's nonverbal immediacy and measures of their generalized impressions of their teacher's assertiveness and responsiveness.

The procedure for data collection was that originally developed to study power in the classroom (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, & Plax, 1987). This method was designed to overcome the problem of teachers being unwilling to have their students complete questionnaires in their classes and the strong resultant biasing of research based on only classes with teacher-volunteers. The procedure asks the student to complete the instruments on the teacher/class which he/she had just before (or will have just after) the class in which the data are collected. When this procedure is employed in general education courses it insures that students with teachers from classes across the academic spectrum will be represented. The method has been used successfully in several previous studies which have involved immediacy (e.g., Christophel, 1990; Richmond, 1990; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987).

The students completed a 10-item measure designed to report their perceptions of the immediacy behaviors of their teacher (see Figure 1). This measure was developed in response to validity problems identified with earlier measures (Rodgers & McCroskey, 1984) which used either generalized impressions (the Generalized Immediacy Scale: Andersen, 1979) or comparative responses (the Behavior Indicators of Immediacy Scale: Andersen, 1979). Earlier versions of this instrument, which evolved from the Rater Perceptions of Immediacy Scale (Andersen, 1979), have included up to 16 items. However, six items dealing with touch, standing, and seating were deleted because they did not contribute to the reliability or validity of the instrument when used in college classrooms. The alpha reliability of this instrument was .83.¹

The students also completed a 20-item measure of Socio-Communicative Style (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). The instrument includes 10 items for assertiveness and 10 items for responsiveness (see Figure 2). This instrument was chosen because of the demonstrated orthogonality of the two style dimensions in the measure and its high internal reliability. It was particularly important in this study that the measures of assertiveness and responsiveness be

FIGURE 1
Perceived Nonverbal Immediacy Behavior Scale

Directions: Below are a series of descriptions of things some teachers have been observed doing in some classes. Please respond to the statements in terms of how well they apply to this teacher. Please use the following scale to respond to each of the statements: Never=0 Rarely=1 Occasionally=2 Often=3 Very Often=4

- ☐ 1. Gestures while talking to the class.
 - ☐ 2. Uses monotone/dull voice when talking to the class.*
 - ☐ 3. Looks at the class while talking.
 - ☐ 4. Smiles at the class while talking.
 - ☐ 5. Has a very tense body position while talking to the class.*
 - ☐ 6. Moves around the classroom while teaching.
 - ☐ 7. Looks at the board or notes while talking to the class.*
 - ☐ 8. Has a very relaxed body position while talking to the class.
 - ☐ 9. Smiles at individual students in the class.
 - ☐ 10. Uses a variety of vocal expressions when talking to the class.
-

* Item should be reflected prior to scoring.

FIGURE 2
Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure*

Directions: The questionnaire below lists twenty personality characteristics. Please indicate the degree to which you believe each of these characteristics applies to this teacher by marking whether you (5) strongly agree that it applies, (4) agree that it applies, (3) are undecided, (2) disagree that it applies, or (1) strongly disagree that it applies. There are no right or wrong answers. Work quickly; record your first impression.

- ☐ 1. helpful
 - ☐ 2. defends own beliefs
 - ☐ 3. independent
 - ☐ 4. responsive to others
 - ☐ 5. forceful
 - ☐ 6. has strong personality
 - ☐ 7. sympathetic
 - ☐ 8. compassionate
 - ☐ 9. assertive
 - ☐ 10. sensitive to the needs of others
 - ☐ 11. dominant
 - ☐ 12. sincere
 - ☐ 13. gentle
 - ☐ 14. willing to take a stand
 - ☐ 15. warm
 - ☐ 16. tender
 - ☐ 17. friendly
 - ☐ 18. acts as a leader
 - ☐ 19. aggressive
 - ☐ 20. competitive
-

*Items 2,3,5,6,9,11,14,18,19, and 20 measure assertiveness. The remainder measure responsiveness. Add the 10 scores for each dimension to obtain the appropriate score.

orthogonal so that any observed joint association between them and immediacy could not be explained as a simple function of colinearity stemming from measurement error. The research reported by Richmond and McCroskey (1990) found the items on the two dimensions of the instrument to factor separately (oblique analysis) and to have no significant correlation between the dimension scores ($r = .01$) when scores were based on either factorial weighted scores or unweighted raw scores. Alpha reliabilities of the two dimensions were .90 for assertiveness and .91 for responsiveness.

Three data analyses were performed. The first involved computing simple correlations between immediacy and both assertiveness and responsiveness. The second analysis involved computing simple correlations between the individual items on the immediacy scale and the assertiveness and responsiveness scores. The final analysis involved computing a canonical correlation between the assertiveness and responsiveness scores on the one hand and the individual item scores for immediacy on the other. This final analysis provides the most general description of the association between Socio-Communicative Style and immediacy.

RESULTS

The results of the simple correlation analyses are reported in Table 1. While *all* of the individual items on the immediacy scale were significantly correlated with *both* assertiveness and responsiveness, some of the items correlated more highly with assertiveness, and some had higher associations with responsiveness. Using vocal variety as opposed to monotony was significantly more associated with assertiveness, while smiling at the class was significantly more associated with responsiveness. The correlations of total immediacy scores with assertiveness and responsiveness also were very similar, .48 and .46 respectively. Thus, the simple correlation analyses indicated that assertiveness was at least as highly associated with immediacy as was responsiveness.

The results of the canonical correlation analysis were consistent with what would be expected based on the simple correlational analyses. The overall relationship was significant ($F = 6.93$, $df\ 20, 434$; $p < .0001$; Wilks Lambda = .57). The first canonical root was significant, with an adjusted canonical correlation of .59. This indicates there was a substantial canonical correlation between Socio-Communicative Style and immediacy accounting for approximately 35 percent shared variance. As indicated in Table 2, all of the immediacy items and both dimensions of Socio-Communicative Style were substantially associated with the first canonical variate.

TABLE 1
Simple Correlations Between
Immediacy and Socio-Communicative Style Scores*

Item	Assertiveness	Responsiveness
1	.26	.16
2**	.41	.25
3	.29	.22
4	.26	.38
5	.25	.32
6	.29	.28
7	.33	.37
8	.33	.37
9**	.21	.35
10	.43	.39
Total Immediacy	.48	.46

* All correlations are statistically significant, $p < .05$.

** Correlations with immediacy are significantly different for the two SCS dimensions.

TABLE 2
Correlations of Immediacy Items, Assertiveness, Responsiveness
And the First Canonical Variate

Item	Correlation
1	.45
2	.69
3	.54
4	.67
5	.60
6	.60
7	.46
8	.73
9	.62
10	.86
Assertiveness	.78
Responsiveness	.76

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation indicate that perceptions of teacher immediacy behaviors are related to more than just responsiveness. While immediacy is substantially related to responsiveness, which manifests itself in behaviors commonly associated with what most people would consider being warm and open, it is equally related to assertiveness, which manifests itself in taking control and acting as a leader--behaviors which would not be seen as being responsive in many instances, and which are not correlated with the measure of responsiveness. Simply put, for a teacher to be immediate should not be equated with the teacher being an "easy mark." Immediate teachers appear to be appropriately assertive as well as responsive to the needs of their students. Given this outcome, it is theoretically justified to teach pre-service and in-service teachers to engage in immediate behaviors which will increase their basic communication competence and be expected to result in more student affective and cognitive learning.

The results of this and previous studies suggest that immediacy behaviors are key components of effective communication in the instructional environment. Clearly, being immediate is more than just being open and warm with students. The present study suggests the people who engage in immediate behaviors are seen (from the vantage point of Bem, 1974) as androgynous and (from the vantage point of McCroskey et. al, 1986) as communicatively competent. If, as suggested by Bem (1974) and McCroskey, et. al (1986), androgynous individuals are ones who are high in both assertiveness and responsiveness, they may be the same individuals who manifest behaviors which result in effective interpersonal communication in many contexts, not just in the classroom. Both Socio-Communicative Style and immediacy need to be investigated in a wide variety of communication contexts. It is highly improbable that the effects observed in the instructional context are restricted to that context. More likely, the theory being generated in this area is generalizable to many other communication contexts.

NOTE

1. While a measure presumed to tap verbal immediacy was also completed by the subjects in this study (Gorham, 1988), the results relating to it are not presented here. Factor analysis indicated this instrument was distinct from nonverbal immediacy (as Gorham noted in her original work). This caused us to question what it was really measuring. We determined that the instrument lacked face validity (for several items on the measure have no theoretic relationship with the immediacy construct), that it was constructed with items intended to represent "effective" teacher behaviors rather than immediate ones, that it included items which produced correlations opposite to the ones which should have been observed, and that it has the potential for an extreme response bias (only one negatively worded item is included). While the results obtained on the instrument were consistent with those to be reported here relating to the nonverbal immediacy measure, we did not feel justified in drawing favorable conclusions based on a measure with questionable validity.

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