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Online Graduate Study of Health Care Learners' Perceptions of Instructional Immediacy

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Abstract

Instructional immediacy is an established communication strategy that teachers can implement to create engaging learning environments. Yet, little is known about experiences distance education learners in graduate study programs have had with immediacy. This article presents findings from a qualitative research project designed to explore healthcare students' ideas about and activities related to instructional immediacy behaviors within a masters program offered exclusively through a *WebCT* online environment. A constructivist theoretical perspective and an action research approach framed the study. Data sources included two focus groups and 10 individual audio-tape recorded transcribed interviews. Content was analyzed by both the primary researcher and an assistant for themes and confirmed through ongoing member checking with participants. The following three overarching themes were identified and are used to explain and describe significant features of instructional immediacy behaviors that healthcare learners who graduated from either a Master of Nursing or Master of Health Studies distance education program found valuable: 1) Model engaging and personal ways of connecting; 2) Maintain collegial relationships; and 3) Honor individual learning accomplishments.

Keywords: immediacy; online graduate study; healthcare learners

Introduction

This article describes findings from a qualitative research project that investigated the experiences, reflections, and feelings of online healthcare students during times in their graduate study program where they experienced or would have valued experiencing instructional immediacy. While the main purpose of the project was to explore learners' ideas about instructional immediacy, a secondary purpose was to consider instructional strategies that respond to learner needs. The research was guided by the question: *What specific instructional immediacy strategies do online graduate healthcare learners perceive as helpful in creating a warm environment rich in social presence and sense of community?*

Participants in the study were graduates of either the Master of Nursing (MN) or Master of Health Studies (MHST) programs offered through the Centre for Nursing and Health Studies at Athabasca University – Canada's Open University. While students enrolled in the MN program hold undergraduate degrees in nursing, those in the MHST program come from nursing, physiotherapy, occupational health, dietetics, medicine and other healthcare disciplines. Both male and female students are enrolled in these graduate study programs and are required to have practiced in their field for at least two years. Graduates of the 2005 class were predominantly women and lived all across Canada as well as in a variety of other countries.

Course work in the MN and MHST programs is completed exclusively online using a *WebCT* course management system, therefore convocation ceremonies at the university campus were the first opportunity for students in these programs to meet their classmates and instructors. Data for the present research was gathered during these ceremonies.

The primary medium for communication, instruction and assessment within the MN and MHST programs is asynchronous text-based threaded discussions within a *WebCT* environment. In most courses, cohorts of approximately 20 students led by one instructor progress through a study guide identifying a series of readings, discussion questions, and learning activities during a 14 week time frame.

Literature Review

A literature review revealed that educators have consistently recognized the link between teachers who demonstrate warm friendly behaviors and the creation of welcoming interactive learning environments. One valuable instructional communication strategy that facilitates a sense of community and fosters a learning climate rich in social presence is immediacy. Considerable research has been undertaken to investigate instructional immediacy behaviors and their effect on students in a variety of different learning events. There is a “gap,” however, in our understanding of how online graduate healthcare learners perceive instructional immediacy within their learning experiences.

The Construct of Immediacy

Immediacy is defined as an affective expression of emotional attachment or closeness to another person and was originally developed by social psychologist Albert Mehrabian in the 1960s (Mehrabian, 1967; 1971; Wiener and Mehrabian, 1968). The construct of immediacy is founded on the premise that individuals are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly and prefer. Expressions of immediacy include both verbal and non verbal behavioral cues. A “we” or “our” statement communicates immediacy while a “you” or “your” statement does not. Subtle variations in language indicate different degrees of separation or non-identity of speakers from the object of their communication.

Immediacy in Higher Education

Educational research examining the process of adapting the construct of immediacy from communication theory to applications in higher education classroom environments has proliferated over the past few decades. Building on Mehrabian's work, Andersen (1979) introduced the concept of instructor nonverbal immediacy in the college classroom. Andersen explained that immediacy is a nonverbal manifestation of high affect and is demonstrated through

maintaining eye contact, leaning closer, touching, smiling, maintaining a relaxed body posture, and attending to voice inflection. Furthering our understanding of the verbal component of the construct, Gorham (1988) identified that using personal examples, engaging in humor, asking questions, initiating conversations with students, addressing students by name, praising student work, and encouraging student expression of opinions are also all examples of instructional immediacy. Links between teacher immediacy, student motivation and affective learning have been examined (Christophel, 1990; Christophel and Gorham, 1995).

In online classroom environments, despite limited or absent non verbal visual cues, knowledge of instructional immediacy continues to develop. In a meta-analysis of 35 studies examining the relationship between teacher immediacy and cognitive learning, Hess and Smythe (2001) asserted that while most research offers only moderate correlations between immediacy and cognitive learning, the experience of liking and feeling close to the instructor led to positive effects in the classroom. Baker (2004) later further affirmed the correlation between immediacy and affective learning. Russo and Benson (2005) determined that perceptions of the instructor's presence were significantly correlated with both affective learning and with student learning satisfaction, an outcome in an online class that is consistent with findings on teacher immediacy literature in traditional classes. These findings all underscore the role of the teacher in establishing an engaging learning environment.

Arbaugh (2001) concluded that instructor immediacy behaviors were significantly associated with student learning and satisfaction in Web-based Masters of Business Administration (MBA) courses. He suggested that teachers who readily used verbally immediate behaviors in face-to-face classrooms could translate the strategies to an online format. In group discussions, he emphasized the importance of instructor's use of personal examples, humor, openness, and encouragement of student ideas. In individual discussion, he emphasized the importance of prompt responses and addressing students by name. Hutchins (2003) posited that instructor success with immediacy behaviors could advance the current theoretical framework for enhancing instructional effectiveness in distance education. Woods and Baker (2004) suggested that instructors can positively affect the quality of communication in the online environment when they move from mere interaction to authentic immediacy and interpersonal closeness.

Immediacy, Social Presence, and a Sense of Community

Instructional immediacy impacts social presence, which in turn, can strengthen the sense of community within learning experiences. Social psychologists Short, Williams and Christie (1976) defined social presence as the degree of salience within interpersonal relationships in mediated communication. Salience implies feelings of presence, engagement, affection, inclusion, and involvement. In essence, social presence is the degree to which a person is perceived as a "real person" in mediated communication. Short and colleagues measured social presence with a series of bipolar scales, sociable-unsociable, personal-impersonal, sensitive-insensitive, and warm-cold. A higher level of presence in a medium confers the attributes of being more sociable, more personal, more sensitive, and warmer.

Scholars in online education have investigated social presence extensively and it is beyond the scope to this article to elaborate on this comprehensive body of work. However, given the established associations among instructional immediacy, social presence and sense of community, a brief snapshot of seminal studies are identified. Within these associations, it is critical to distinguish that, from a constructivist framework, while teachers are responsible for the instructional immediacy behaviors that can set the stage for affective communication, both

teachers and learners are responsible for behaviors that contribute to social presence and a sense of community.

According to Gunawardena (1995), immediacy increases social presence and thus enhances the degree to which a person is perceived as 'real'. Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2001) defined social presence as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry. Social presence has been found to be related to students' perceived learning and satisfaction (Gunawardena and Zittte, 1997; Richardson and Swan, 2003), persistence with their courses (Rovai, 2002), more complex discussion postings (Polhemus, Shih and Swan, 2001) and a significant factor in improving instructional effectiveness (Tu, 2002).

The complexities of establishing a sense of community among online learners has also been studied extensively. Social presence, with its underpinnings of immediacy, is considered a key element in establishing strong communities of inquiring and connected learners. Anderson (2004), referring to Garrison Anderson, and Archer's (2000) community of inquiry model, explained that social presence relates to the establishment of a supportive environment "such that students feel the necessary degree of comfort and safety to express their ideas in a collaborative context. The absence of social presence leads to an inability to express disagreements, share viewpoints, explore differences, and accept support and confirmation from peers and teacher" (p.274).

Current research has begun to explore the role of networked based learning tools designed to support interaction and social presence. Anderson (2005) discussed how these tools, known as educational social software (ESS), may be able to resolve students' conflicts between the freedom to pace their own learning and yet still work cooperatively with other students. Newer educational ESS tools are cost effective and offer students opportunities to connect with one another beyond the traditional methods of email and conferencing. In designing these tools, Anderson (2005) noted the importance of including mechanisms for students to make their presence online known, to notify them that new content or communication has been entered in to a learning space, to have systems that filter out illegitimate information, to refer them to activities where others are engaged, to model profiles that reflect individual learners, to facilitate introducing learners to one another, to promote helping others and to document and share constructed objects. At Athabasca University, Anderson (2005) has initiated research examining one social software tool set, the ELGG open source software.

Finally, Woods and Ebersole (2003) asserted that strong connections exist between a positive social dynamic and learning, but that creating that dynamic doesn't 'just happen,' rather, it must be intentionally created through a variety of communication cues. Likewise Aragon (2003) urged educators not to take social presence for granted and ensure that strategies promoting relationship development are built in to online course design and instruction.

Health Care Learners Valuing of Closeness

Although the constructs of instructional immediacy and social presence may not be identified specifically in research examining healthcare learners' experiences with online courses, a scan of current studies does suggest that a feeling of closeness and community is desired and valued. In their seminal work benchmarking best practices in Web-based nursing courses, Billings, Connors and Skiba (2001) identified an expectation that connectedness, where students and faculty form an online learning community that overcomes isolation, is present. Further, in her overview of best practices in online clinical content courses, Herie (2004) emphasized the crucial importance

of establishing a climate of psychological safety where learners feel supported by their instructor and peers. Diekelmann and Mendias (2005) discussed the importance of teachers being a supportive presence in online courses by knowing and connecting with students through writing.

In continuing education, an exploration of Canadian nurses' experiences with Web-based learning through surveys and focus group interviews noted nurses' appreciation of interactions with one another and their teachers in the forum and found these connections "sustained them" (Atack and Rankin, 2002, p. 20).

In undergraduate education, a comparative analysis of different instructional communications methods online found significant group differences in satisfaction when carefully planned communication strategies were implemented (Frith and Kee, 2003). Also, in their work with second degree students comparing web-based and traditional course delivery methods, Kearns, Shoaf and Summey (2004) identified that students in the traditional course were more satisfied. A key contributor to students' dissatisfaction with their online course was the untimeliness of instructor feedback. These students " . . . expressed a strong sense of uncertainty about progressing with remaining coursework due to feedback delays" (Kearns, Shoaf and Summey, 2004, p.283).

In graduate education, a pre-test/ post-test survey of perceptions and preferences highlighted specific needs for adequate socialization and instructional support (Wills and Stommel, 2002). Similarly, in doctoral education, case study reports illustrated how helpful teachers' welcoming practices such as sending personal email were in reducing anxiety (Diekelmann and Gunn, 2004).

The Research Approach

This project was framed from a constructivist theoretical perspective (Appleton and King, 2002; Peters, 2000) and a naturalistic action research design (Altrichter, Posch and Somekh, 1998; Corey, 1949; Kemmis and McTaggart, 1990; Stringer and Genat, 2004). Data sources included two focus groups and ten audio tape-recorded transcribed interviews with graduates who attended Convocation ceremonies at Athabasca University campus. Content from these data sources were analyzed by both the primary researcher and an assistant. The transcripts were thoroughly read and re-read and a systematic process of content analysis was developed (Loiselle et al., 2004) to create the categorization and coding scheme that led to the themes. Pseudonyms were used when participants' comments are reported verbatim. Trustworthiness was established through ongoing interaction and member checking with participants to ensure authenticity. Full ethical approval was granted by the university.

Naturalistic Action Research

Action research is a reflective, spiral process where teachers use research techniques to examine their own educational practice carefully, systematically and with the intention of applying their findings directly to their own and other educators' every day practice. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) offered the seminal explanation that action research is deliberate, solution-oriented investigation that is group or personally owned and conducted. It is characterized by spiraling cycles of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action taken, and, finally, problem redefinition. The linking of the terms "action" and "research" highlights the essential features of this method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about or improving curriculum, teaching, and learning (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). Kemmis and McTaggart (1990) also suggested that the participatory nature of

action research, where researchers collaborate with participants in order to understand and improve educational events, can reduce the distance between researchers and participants and the “. . . problems they intend to solve, or the lived experience they intend to interpret” (p. 28).

Naturalistic research reflects a qualitative approach. As Ferrance (2000) explained: “The idea of using research in a 'natural' setting to change the way that the researcher interacts with that setting can be traced back to Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist and educator whose work on action research was developed throughout the 1940s in the United States. “Lewin is credited with coining the term ‘action research’ to describe work that did not separate the investigation from the action needed to solve the problem ” (as cited in McFarland and Stansell, 1993, p. 14)” (p. 7)

In the 1940s and 1950s, at Teachers College at Columbia University, Steven Corey (1949) was one of the first to advocate action research approaches in the field of education. In Corey’s view, action research was different from the existing quantitative paradigm focusing on findings that could be generalized to “. . . uniformities, explanatory principles or scientific laws” (p. 63). Rather, Corey stated “The action researcher is interested in the improvement of the educational practices in which he [sic] is engaging. He undertakes research in order to find out how to do his job better – action research means research that affects actions” (p. 63). In his view, action research was valued more for the change it can initiate in everyday practice than for a quantitative goal of generalizing the findings to a broader audience.

In their text *Teachers Investigate Their Work: An Introduction to the Methods of Action Research*, Altrichter, Posch and Somekh (1998) identified that interviewing students is an effective method of data collection and that developing categories and coding data is an effective method of data analysis within an action research approach. In healthcare, Stringer and Genat (2004) call for health professionals to engage in action research to “. . . seek practical solutions to problems in particular contexts . . . to engage participants in inquiry and enable the most effective use of knowledge available” (p. iv).

The following three themes emerged from analyzing the interview and focus group data collected from and confirmed with students who successfully completed their graduate studies online. The themes represent students’ perceptions of key areas of instructional behaviors that demonstrate immediacy online. The first theme was to model engaging and personal ways of connecting. The second theme was to maintain collegial relationships. The third theme was to honor individual learning accomplishments.

Theme One: Model Engaging and Personal Ways of Connecting

Without exception, participants in this project all commented on how instructor communication that was appropriately personal in nature demonstrated immediacy and engaged them. When teachers introduced themselves at the beginning of a course by mentioning their family life as well as their work life, participants discussed how this modeled a meaningful way of relating within the course.

It is not unexpected that learners who have actively practiced in a healthcare discipline and who may demonstrate strong immediacy themselves would value having the skill modeled in an online setting. In traditional healthcare learning events, facilitators who begin classes by reaching out to participants individually, who share aspects of their own experiences and who use words that project gentle encouragement are well received.

Despite an absence of non verbal immediacy cues, similarities exist when adapting this established process of engagement to online classrooms. At the beginning of the course, an instructional strategy such as sending a private email welcoming each participant can communicate interest in learners as individuals. As Marg explained: “I had this wonderfully warm email introduction . . . before the course even started . . . [from an instructor who] just made me feel that she knew who I was and that she was looking forward to having me as part of her course. She gave a little synopsis of the course in a friendly and informal way, which made me have a sense that I would really enjoy the course. It was so welcoming – you just felt as if you really belonged.”

Similarly, Lana described her response to a private email she received: [The instructor said] “Welcome Lana, nice to have you from Toronto, you bring a lot to us because of your focus and where you work.” Small thing . . . but [the instructor] recognized and read [my introduction]. Just a general ‘welcome to the class’ isn’t nearly as personal.”

From the students’ perspective, a key indication of immediacy was communicated in an instructor’s first introductory posting. In Carol’s words: “As a teacher, I would suggest that you talk about yourself, a little about the human aspects of you as a person . . . it just makes it more personable than artificial.” Linda added: “The teachers that took time to introduce themselves and talk about their interests . . . ‘I have a dog,’ ‘I live here’ and established humanness really made a difference. And Claire continued: “The instructors I felt comfortable with set the stage [in their introductions] about who they were. That was very important to me to have a sense of who they were, their family, where they graduated from, what their work experience was, what their day was like, that sort of thing.”

Further, including pictures in an introductory message was particularly important. Ella commented: “My first instructor posted a picture of herself, which I appreciated. This was actually a real person at the end of the line, somebody we could really connect with.” Bonnie noted how the inclusion of pictures could be further personalized: “One of the instructors did a profile of everybody. [She collected] pictures and information about everyone in the class and gave us a document.

Addressing students by name communicated genuine interest. Rainu, whose first language was not English, stated: “For people like me, not from Canada, I was glad when instructors attempted to learn my name and use it.” English speaking students concurred that seeing their names written out personalized communication as well.

Enhancing more formal course content messages with inspirational or humorous sayings also modeled immediacy and strengthened social presence. Karen observed: “One example of how an instructor showed caring . . . she gave a lot of herself in the course . . . was an idea about how you might reach out to others with an ‘appreciagram’. She made a little email card with a picture patting someone on the back that says ‘I appreciate.’ Her name was on the bottom and then she wrote feedback to me on it. I developed one for my work and started using it. I asked my staff to put these cards at each of their sites and they can do the same thing.” Similarly, participants in the focus groups discussed how postings that included poems, metaphors and tasteful humor helped create a safe welcoming environment where they felt willing to take risks.

Theme Two: Maintain Collegial Relationships

A striking feature of the present project was the value learners placed on language that reflected immediacy. Examples of instructors' words that stood out for participants included invitations to join, to journey with, to learn together, to enjoy, to care and to appreciate. Responses that were valued included: this is a thoughtful, helpful or useful comment; it ties in with . . . , how you feel about . . . and thank you for sharing. And, rather than noting what students "should" have done, guiding questions such as have you thought of . . . , might you consider . . . or how could you explore . . . were appreciated.

Prompt responses clearly contributed to students' perceptions that their instructors were present, accessible and immediate. Emily explained: "Getting emails answered promptly from the professors, that was wonderful. . . . Having confirmation that papers I submitted were received right away. Knowing where the instructors were, if they were out of town at a conference and couldn't get back to you right away, that promoted collegiality, I could respect their time." Kristin added: "I felt like I wasn't just a student at a computer. My instructors were always there. They allowed you to ask questions, no matter how silly they sounded. The more you could question the more connected you felt. With the best professors, you felt heard and that it mattered to them that you were there and that what you were contributing was useful."

By contrast, delayed responses and limited postings communicated disinterest. John clarified: "There were some instructors who were quite invisible. You didn't see them. Some of them said that right at the beginning that this was their style and that they would stand back unless they were asked questions. That behavior, right away, I felt they were not interested or they could not be bothered."

Encouraging social conversations in 'coffee room' forums rather than in course content areas stimulated social presence. Time and again, the adult learners in the present research expressed difficulty balancing the volume of reading required in graduate courses with their home and work demands. While the support from classmates for life events such as family births or deaths, achievements and challenges were all welcome conversations, being able to distinguish between academic and social messages was useful.

Maintaining teacher-student communication through private email further strengthened collegiality. Instructors who 'checked in' with students individually projected immediacy. Lynn's reflections described one instructional strategy that stood out for her. "The one thing I remember about the course wasn't the content of the material; it was the instructor saying 'tell me what you do to keep yourself healthy – what is your wellness plan?' So, an interest in me outside of my academia and wanting to actually make me a better person really stuck in my head." Other participants spoke about feeling connected with instructors who asked them: "So, how are you? Are you doing OK? Is the course too overwhelming? I'm feeling that you are struggling here?"

Theme Three: Honor Individual Learning Accomplishments

Private emails that acknowledged strengths and offered constructive feedback on student work inspired social presence. While public acknowledgement of accomplishments was discussed in the research interviews, several participants commented that: "If you don't get mentioned – you think what's wrong with my work?" Students' clear appreciation of detailed feedback is reflected in comments such as: "A lot of us can take the negative feedback, but if it is not constructive –

how is it going to help us?" . . . "The teachers who gave you feedback instead of just a mark. . . ." The ones who would do 'track changes' on your assignments . . ." "When they directed you and said you did this well and this is where you can improve. . ." "When someone takes the time to really explain how you can do something better, to me – that's caring!"

Responding to individual learning concerns and offering different perspectives also communicated immediacy. In response to Betty's ". . . thinking I should be making 90% or above at least in all my courses," her advisor helped her "focus, get back on track and remember that this is education and learning – not just achieving high marks."

Similarly, responding by offering resources specific to individual student projects fostered immediacy. Mai-Ling valued: "When an instructor would say – 'I've read an article about that in such and such a spot, you might acknowledge it' or 'have you heard of this book' – sharing resources like that lent a good feeling."

Adapting course requirements when life crisis's emerged for students was also perceived as instructional immediacy. During discussions of instances when they were granted extensions to attend to family or work situations, participants frequently mentioned how instructors "understood" their personal needs during these difficult times.

Discussion

The aforementioned three themes, developed from discussions with students who successfully completed their graduate degrees exclusively through a *WebCT* online course management system, begin to illustrate the kinds of instructional immediacy behaviors that this group of learners' value. Listening attentively as students discussed their experiences and memories revealed useful ways of looking at how to create possibilities for learning environments rich in immediacy and social presence.

Specific instructional strategies that were important to students included modeling engaging and personal ways of connecting, maintaining collegial relationships and honoring individual learning accomplishments. These findings are consistent with Arbaugh's (2001) work with MBA students. They provide support to Woods and Baker's (2004) call to create more opportunities for authentic immediacy within online instruction. And, the idea of intentionally using verbal cues to project warmth, sensitivity and sociability is not significantly different from the ideas about immediacy first identified by Albert Mehrabian in the 1960s.

However, some of the strategies that stood out for this group of professional graduate level learners are unique. Posting self-introductions that include pictures and personal information about home and work, particularly at the beginning of the learning event, can be expected to communicate immediacy. Creating a document with biographical information about all members of the class can be helpful in developing a sense of community within the class group. Initiating private emails to learners can express personal interest. Responding promptly can indicate that an instructor is consistently present and available. Including affective learning elements such as poems, metaphors and tasteful humor in forum postings can strengthen social presence. Ensuring that social conversations, while enjoyable, do not dominate or distract can project respect for learners' limited time. As well, writing individuals' names, choosing words with gentle connotations and responding empathically to students' expressions of their individual needs can be well received. Therefore, instructors who risk implementing these kinds of online teaching approaches may be perceived as likeable and friendly.

The present investigation suggests expanding our ideas about facilitating learning with online graduate learners to include acknowledging the importance of establishing personal and collegial connections among students and teachers. In turn, this acknowledgment can guide us toward a deeper understanding of how best to model and respond with immediacy and to encourage meaningful social presence within online learning environments. Knowing how much online graduate learners value immediate instructors leads us to look for ways to demonstrate warm and inviting behaviors in our virtual classrooms. Affirmations of the value of instructors' willingness to share their personal experiences, to remain involved in discussions and to honor each student in unique ways inspires us to pay careful attention to these activities.

Conclusion

This article presented findings from a naturalistic action research study that explored online graduate students' perceptions of specific instructional immediacy strategies that helped create a warm environment rich in social presence and a sense of community within a *WebCT* course management system. In contrast to other studies that explored the construct of immediacy, this project extends existing understanding of instructional immediacy by describing professional healthcare workers' reflections on their own experiences during their masters program by identifying three overarching themes. This research found that learners especially valued instructors who modeled engaging and personal ways of connecting, who maintained collegial relationships and who honored individual learning accomplishments. The article calls for the creation of more opportunities to understand how students themselves perceive immediacy and social presence and for continued attention to constructing teaching strategies that respond to and collaborate with students in innovative and genuinely friendly ways.

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