Chapter 16
Going Digital: How Teacher Immediacy Can Help Reluctant Teachers Embrace Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore teacher immediacy strategies that help online instructors form connections with students while teaching in distance learning environments. Teacher immediacy consists of both verbal and nonverbal behaviors teachers can use that generate perceptions of closeness with students, which often feels lacking in a distance learning environment. Specific examples of immediacy behaviors in online courses are provided. The chapter shares examples of student/teacher interactions in a course built around teacher immediacy principles, identifying the specific principles visible in each interaction. Finally, the chapter ends with recommendations for practice using teacher immediacy strategies to build relationships with students in online courses.

INTRODUCTION

What is the role of the teacher in today’s information-saturated, digital world, where it seems any knowledge one seeks can be instantly acquired through a quick internet search? Is the purpose simply to have a guide for this process, a person to curate and organize the astonishing amounts of available information for potential students? Research indicates that for most teachers, the joys of teaching are less about content delivery than about the relationships they are able to develop with their students, which seems more challenging to develop in an online environment.

For example, a recent survey of K-12 teachers found that of survey participants, 92% went into the profession to make a difference in pupil’s lives, and 86% went into the profession out of a desire to work with children and young people (McNeil, 2015). This is not just true for K-12 teachers either, as a Chronicle of Higher Education survey found that out of four key tasks that contribute to a faculty
member’s workload (also including research, service, and mentoring), teaching stood out as the most satisfying, with 90.9% of respondents reporting satisfaction with teaching students (June, 2018). At the same time, according to a survey by Inside Higher Ed, only 30% of instructors who have taught online classes say they believe online courses can achieve student outcomes comparable to face-to-face courses, a percentage that is decreasing even as an increasing number of professors say they have taught an online course (Lederman, 2018). These surveys indicate that most teachers at all levels value teaching and working with students and are concerned about maintaining the quality of teaching that can be achieved face-to-face in an online learning environment.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore one strategy for building connections with students while teaching in distance learning environments. The strategy explored in this chapter is teacher immediacy, particularly as it applies in virtual environments. First, the concept of teacher immediacy will be defined, particularly as it relates to behaviors teachers can use to build connections in a distance learning context. Next, examples will be provided of what these can look like in practice, using a Distance Learning course with no face-to-face components. Finally, a demonstration of students’ in-class responses to these behaviors will be shared. The paper concludes with a list of best practices for online learning using teacher immediacy as a strategy.

BACKGROUND

Immediacy as a concept in human relations was described as early as the 1960s (Mehrabian, 1969, 1971), and has provided a useful framework for thinking about interactions in classrooms between students and teachers (Witt & Wheeless, 2001). Teacher immediacy encompasses both verbal and nonverbal behaviors that serve to generate perceptions of closeness with students (Andersen, 1979). Specific behaviors in a face-to-face environment include “consistent eye contact, movement, vocal variety, gestures, humor, and personalized examples during class” (Andersen, 1986, p. 115). Decades of research have consistently shown the positive benefits of teacher immediacy, which include increased cognitive and affective learning (Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987), higher levels of motivation (Christophel, 1990), and more frequent and deeper class participation (Roberts & Friedman, 2013). The most positive benefits of teacher immediateness in a face-to-face environment seem to result from students’ heightened feelings of satisfaction with their teachers and classes (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). The combination of studies demonstrating higher student satisfaction in classes with greater levels of teacher immediacy and increased cognitive benefits indicates that satisfied students work harder and immerse themselves deeper in the content, leading to the improved cognitive outcomes mentioned above.

As virtual teaching environments have become more common, new research has offered suggestions for online teacher immediacy practices, as well as studies on the effectiveness of such practices. For example, Farwell (2011) adapted some immediacy behaviors to an online context and provided examples for accomplishing these adaptations. For example, immediate verbal behaviors in an online context included initiating discussions, asking questions, using humor and self-disclosure, and addressing students by name, while nonverbal behaviors included the use of emojis to represent emotion. Numerous studies have found that online teacher immediacy behaviors are linked to a host of positive outcomes, much as they are in face-to-face environments. These benefits include increased perceptions of “credibility” among students (Mazer & Stowe, 2016), improving students’ online participation and satisfaction (Ghamdi, Anthony & Samarji, 2016), and increased cognitive learning (LeFebvre & Allen, 2014).
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