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The Relation Between Teacher Self-Disclosure and Student Motives to Communicate

Jacob L. Cayanus, Matthew M. Martin, & Alan K. Goodboy

Teacher behaviors have an impact on student engagement. This study examined the relation between teacher self-disclosure and student motives to communicate in the classroom. Three dimensions of teacher self-disclosure were studied: amount, relevance, and negativity. Results indicated that (a) the teacher self-disclosure dimension of negativity was related to the relational, participatory, excuse-making, and sycophancy motives; and (b) the amount and relevance dimensions of teacher self-disclosure were related to the functional and participatory motives.

Keywords: Classroom Communication; Student Motives; Teacher Self-Disclosure

Student engagement is one of the best predictors of learning; the more time students spend involved with a topic (e.g., reading, working on projects, participating in in-class and out-of-class discussions), the more they learn (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). The National Survey of Student Engagement ([NSSE], 2008) stated that ''engagement means creating habits of mind'' (p. 4) and that increasing student engagement requires effort from both students and teachers. When students and teachers are engaged, they incorporate their life experiences in class discussions.

Jacob L. Cayanus (EdD, West Virginia University, 2005) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Oakland University, Rochester, MI. Matthew M. Martin (PhD, Kent State University, 1992) is a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at West Virginia University, Morgantown. Alan K. Goodboy (PhD, West Virginia University, 2007) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. *Correspondence*: Jacob L. Cayanus, Department of Communication and Journalism, Oakland University, 316 Wilson Hall, Rochester, MI 48309; E-mail: cayanus@oakland.edu

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When students are more engaged, they are more motivated and more likely to communicate with their teachers (Weber, Martin, & Cayanus, 2005). Student engagement increases based on the quantity of interactions with teachers (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005), as well as the quality of those interactions (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). This study investigated two communication variables relevant to teacher–student interactions in the classroom: teacher self-disclosure and students' motives for communicating with their instructor.

In the classroom, teachers often tell stories to help clarify the material (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988; Wambach & Brothen, 1997), to increase student participation (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994), and to increase affective learning (Sorensen, 1989). One such way of using narratives is through teacher self-disclosure. Wheeless and Grotz (1976) defined interpersonal self-disclosure as "any message about the self that a person communicates to another" (p. 338). The more teachers self-disclose, the more out-of-class communication they have with their students and the greater their students' interest (Cayanus & Martin, 2003; Cayanus, Martin, & Weber, 2003). However, it is important to note that teach self-disclosure does not always lead to reciprocal disclosures from students (Ebersole, McFall, & Brandt, 1977) and, further, that students may disclose more with other students than they do with their teachers (Myers, 1998).

When studying interpersonal relationships, Wheeless and Grotz (1977) argued that several dimensions of self-disclosure exist: intent, amount, valence, honesty, and intimacy. Cayanus and Martin (2008) focused on three dimensions of self-disclosure in the classroom setting: amount, relevance, and negativity. *Amount* refers to how much and often a teacher uses self-disclosure in the classroom (e.g., using five personal disclosures during one class period). *Relevance* involves the disclosure relating to the topic of classroom discussion (e.g., telling a story about how a friendship developed when discussing Uncertainty Reduction Theory). *Negativity* entails disclosing "bad" things in the classroom (e.g., telling a class you routinely lie to your department chair).

Cayanus and Martin (2008) observed that all three dimensions of teacher self-disclosure (amount, relevance, and negativity) positively related to affective learning, motivation to attend class, and teacher clarity. In addition, the authors found that amount, relevance, and lack of negativity correlated with reports of student interest. Cayanus, Martin, and Myers (2008) discovered that students employ the information-seeking strategy of observation when they believe their teachers are engaging in disclosures that are relevant and not negative in nature. These studies offer support for the multidimensional nature of teacher self-disclosure. Although Cayanus (2004) argued for the use of teacher self-disclosure as an instructional tool for student learning, it is important to understand how it relates to student communication—particularly, student motives to communicate in the classroom.

Students' Motives for Communicating with Teachers

Martin, Myers, and Mottet (1999) identified five motives students reported for communicating with their teachers: excuse-making, functional, participatory,

relational, and sycophancy. Students who are motivated to communicate with their teachers for *relational* reasons attempt to develop interpersonal relationships with their teachers. Students who are motivated to communicate for *functional* reasons do so in an attempt to learn more about the course requirements, course materials, and course assignments. Students who are motivated to communicate for *participatory* reasons want to demonstrate they know the course material. Students who are motivated to communicate for *excuse-making* reasons do so to explain why assignments are either incomplete or not completed at all. Students who are motivated to communicate for *sycophantic* reasons want to make a favorable impression on the teacher.

Students' personalities and beliefs impact their motives. Students who are more assertive are likely to communicate for the relational, participatory, and functional motives, whereas communication-apprehensive students are less likely to communicate for those same motives (Martin, Valencic, & Heisel, 2001; Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002b). Verbally aggressive students report communicating less frequently for the functional motive (Edwards & Myers, in press) than verbally non-aggressive students do. Moreover, students who believe they can make an impact communicate more for relational and participatory motives than they do for other motives (Weber et al., 2005).

In addition, students' motives are related to their classroom behaviors and learning. For example, students who say they communicate more frequently for the relational, participatory, and functional motives report greater affective and cognitive learning (Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 2000) than their counterparts, who do not report they communicate for these motives. Further, Myers, Martin, and Mottet (2002a) found that students who communicate more for the functional motive are more likely to use overt information-seeking strategies than those who do not communicate for the functional motive. Finally, when students communicate more with their teachers *in* the classroom, they also have more *out-of-class* communication with their teachers (Knapp, Martin, & Myers, 2005).

How teachers communicate, or how students perceive their teachers, also impacts students' motives. Teachers who are assertive, responsive, immediate, and friendly have students who report communicating for relational, functional, and participatory motives (Martin, Valencic, & Heisel, 2001; Myers et al., 2002b; Myers, Mottet, & Martin, 2000). Teachers' overall uses of behavior alteration techniques (what teachers say and do to try to influence students; Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1985) are related to students' communicating more for the participatory and excuse-making motives (Martin, Heisel, & Valencic, 2000) than for other motives. When teachers use more verbal approach strategies (verbal behaviors encoded to produce feelings of closeness; Mottet & Richmond, 1998), students report communicating for the relational, participatory, excuse-making, and sycophancy motives (Mottet, Martin, & Myers, 2004). In addition, Cayanus and Martin (2004) found a positive relation between amount of teacher self-disclosure and the motives of relational, excuse-making, and sycophancy. Although the work of Cayanus and Martin (2004) provides some insight into how teacher self-disclosure could influence students' motives, only the amount of self-disclosure was included in their study.

Given that previous research has demonstrated the value of considering self-disclosure dimensions beyond amount, this study considered the self-disclosure dimensions of amount, relevance, and negativity. Because little is known about the relevance and negativity of teacher self-disclosure, the following research question was offered:

RQ1: What is the relation between students' perceptions of their teachers' amount, relevance and negativity of self-disclosure and student motives for communicating with their teachers?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants in this study were 269 (135 men, 115 women, and 19 who did not report gender) students enrolled in an introductory Communication Studies course at a large Mid-Atlantic university. The mean age for the participants was 20.96 ($SD = 2.76$). Each of the participants completed a survey that included measures for teacher self-disclosure and student motives to communicate with their teachers. Participants completed the instruments in reference to the teacher of the class they had last attended before the current course. Data were collected near the middle of the semester.

Instruments

The Teacher Self-Disclosure Scale (Cayanus & Martin, 2008) is a 14-item instrument that asks students to report their perceptions of teachers' use of self-disclosure. This scale measures three aspects of self-disclosure: amount (four items), relevance (five items), and negativity (five items). Participants respond to how each item applies to their teacher using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Sample items include the following: "My teacher often talks about what he/she does on weekends," "My teacher reveals undesirable things about him/herself," and "My teacher uses personal examples to make the content relevant to me." Means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas, and ranges for the three dimensions were as follows: amount ($M = 16.26$, $SD = 4.58$; $\alpha = .77$; range = 4–27), relevance ($M = 24.43$, $SD = 5.44$; $\alpha = .80$; range = 5–35), and negativity ($M = 24.08$, $SD = 6.68$; $\alpha = .83$; range = 5–34).

Motives for communicating with instructors were operationalized using the Martin, Mottet, and Myers (2000) 30-item measure. Students were asked to rate on a Likert-type scale ranging from 5 (*exactly like me*) to 1 (*not at all like me*) how each of the statements reflected their own reasons for talking to their instructors. Means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas, and ranges for the five dimensions were as follows: relational ($M = 14.72$, $SD = 5.89$; $\alpha = .92$; range = 6–29), functional ($M = 20.82$, $SD = 5.41$; $\alpha = .86$; range = 6–30), sycophancy ($M = 15.05$, $SD = 6.05$; $\alpha = .88$; range = 6–29), excuse-making ($M = 15.68$, $SD = 5.75$; $\alpha = .86$; range = 6–30), and participation ($M = 15.99$, $SD = 5.85$; $\alpha = .87$; range = 6–30).

Results

To answer the research question, a canonical correlation was conducted. Canonical correlation can show the correlation between two sets of variables, how that correlation relates to the individual correlation between the variables, and how much the individual variables in each set add to the overall correlation (Tucker & Chase, 1976). The three dimensions of teacher self-disclosure served as one set of variables, and the five dimensions of student motives to communicate were the second set. There were two significant, interpretable roots (Wilks's $\Lambda = .66$), $F(15, 685) = 7.30$,

Table 1 Canonical Loadings of Teacher Self-Disclosure and Student Motives to Communicate

	Canonical loadings	
Variable	Rc_1	Rc_2
Set 1: Teacher self-disclosure		
Amount	.22	.87
Negativity	.95	.19
Relevance	−.38	.91
Redundancy coefficient	.11	.03
Set 2: Student motives to communicate		
Relational	.80	.45
Functional	−.33	.92
Excuse-making	.58	.39
Participatory	.62	.61
Sycophancy	.62	.48
Redundancy coefficient	.10	.02

Note. Wilks's $\Lambda = .66$, $F(15, 685) = 7.30$, $p < .001$ ($Rc_1 = .54$, $Rc_2 = .22$).

Table 2 Correlations Among the Research Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Amount	—	.35**	.62**	.20**	.12	.17*	.12	.18*
2. Negativity		—	−.05	.42**	−.12	.34**	.31**	.34**
3. Relevance			—	.08	.25**	.06	.04	.05
4. Relational				—	.11	.66**	.46**	.67**
5. Functional					—	.31**	.27**	.15*
6. Participatory						—	.54**	.77**
7. Excuse-making							—	.44**
8. Sycophancy								—

*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

$p < .001$: $Rc_1 = .54$ and $Rc_2 = .22$, accounting for 29% and 5% of the variance, respectively. In Root 1, students who perceived teachers' self-disclosures as negative reported communicating more frequently for the relational, excuse-making, participatory, and sycophancy motives than they did for other motives. In Root two, when students perceived a higher number of disclosures and, further, that these disclosures were relevant, they reported communicating more for the functional and participation motives (see Table 1) than for other motives. Pearson correlations for the variables appear in Table 2.

Discussion

With the myriad of distractions students have available to them, the idea of student engagement in the classroom may be problematic. According to Kuh (2001), engagement is becoming a criterion for effectiveness in the classroom. The problem is that many college students simply do not participate in class. In a national survey, only 54% of first-year students reported participating in classroom communication (NSSE, 2000). How can we, as educators, promote more engagement in the classroom? There is evidence that teachers' communication impacts student engagement (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 2002; Skinner & Belmont, 1993), making it important to examine techniques and styles of teachers as a way of improving student engagement. One such technique is the use of self-disclosure.

Is teacher self-disclosure related to why students talk in the classroom? Although more research is needed, there is support for the idea that teacher self-disclosure may help (or hinder) students' communication in the classroom. A canonical correlation analysis involving teacher self-disclosure and student motives to communicate produced two significant, meaningful roots. The first root focused on the self-disclosure aspect of negativity. Although teachers may be expected to avoid self-disclosing information that is overwhelmingly negative (e.g., a drug addiction, failing out of school, cheating on a significant other), there might be negative consequences to only or mainly revealing information that is complimentary. Students might feel inferior to their teachers. Students might also perceive that their teachers are narcissistic.

Clearly, these findings warrant further investigation. For instance, a marketing professor may use examples from past work history describing products he or she promoted. If every example given is a success story, students may react differently than if some of the stories detail successes, whereas others relay failures. Similarly, a professor teaching research methods, who admits to making mistakes in conducting previous studies, might be more effective than the professor who proclaims that the work he or she conducted has been flawless. Martin, Mottet, and Myers (2000) found that students talk more in class when they like their teachers. According to the principle of *homophily* (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1971), individuals who see each other as similar are more likely to communicate, understand, and engage in future interactions then those who perceive each other as dissimiler. Teachers who disclose information that is somewhat negative may be viewed by students as more approachable than teachers who only disclose positive information. In support of this, Cayanus (2007) found that students view their

teachers as more human and approachable when those teachers were perceived as more open by self-disclosing negative, as well as positive, information about themselves.

The second root involving student motives showed that when teachers self-disclose, and those disclosures are viewed by students as being relevant, students are more likely to actively participate in class and to ask questions that directly relate to the course. This finding may explain a discrepancy in the literature: Goldstein and Benassi (1994) found that amount of teacher self-disclosure was positively related to amount of student participation, whereas Wambach and Brothen (1997) failed to find a similar association. When teachers are relevant in their self-disclosures, students seemingly are more motivated to play an active role in the learning process than when teachers' self-disclosures are not relevant. Students do not see their teachers as just telling stories. Instead, they appear to view relevant self-disclosures as their teachers' attempts to create a positive, open learning environment. In addition, when the teacher's self-disclosures are not relevant, students are less likely to communicate in the classroom.

Three limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, we did not examine a causal relationship. Thus, we cannot state that teacher self-disclosure actually influences students' motivation to communicate in the classroom. Second, the relationship between the student and the teacher may affect the perceptions of the self-disclosures. As Ebersole et al. (1977) noted, students reciprocated self-disclosure more when they had taken a prior course from the teacher. Third, we did not explore whether responses to teachers' self-disclosures vary as a function of different types of learning style. Akkoyunlu and Soylu (2008) found that students' learning styles affect views of certain learning environments.

Future research should explore if teacher self-disclosure is perceived by students as a possible teacher confirmation behavior. Like teacher self-disclosure, teacher confirmation behaviors positively influence student motivation and learning (Ellis, 2000, 2004), as well as perceptions of teacher credibility (Schrodt, Turman, & Soliz, 2006). Most notably, teacher self-disclosure may reflect the "teaching style" dimension of teacher confirmation. As Ellis (2000) explained, confirming teachers use a variety of interactive strategies to help students understand the course material. Teacher self-disclosure may be one interactive teaching strategy that is confirming to students by helping them understand course material through personal elucidations.

Chesebro (2002) concluded in the book, *Communication for Teachers,* that teachers should (a) think of students first and teach accordingly and (b) practice effective communication behaviors. Teachers who use self-disclosure intentionally are probably aware of their use of self-disclosure (e.g., when, what, why) in their instruction. As an effective communication behavior, self-disclosure may be one method for teachers to use in their classrooms to promote engagement.

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