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An Investigation of College Students' Perceptions of Teaching Assistants' Immediacy Behaviors

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Abstract

The knowledge of effective teaching skills is irreplaceable in the enhancement of student cognitive and affective learning. This study analyzed college students' perceptions of their teaching assistants' nonverbal immediacy behaviors. A total of 226 college students voluntarily participated in the study. Results revealed that there were sex differences among perceptions of nonverbal immediacy behaviors.

Nonverbal immediacy and its relation to how students view their classroom instructors has been the focus of several past studies (Baringer & McCroskey; Kearney, 2000; Christophel, 1990; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Plax, Smith, & Sorensen, 1988;). Research of teacher immediacy shows instructors who demonstrate high immediacy, both verbal and nonverbal, have a positive impact on student learning (Frymier, 1994). These studies tend to focus on professional teachers and are more generalized to teachers who have been trained in teaching methodologies as well as have some experience in the classroom.

This research study seeks to understand similar issues but instead focuses on the subject of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Due to the fact many teaching assistants (TAs) have had inadequate training in how to conduct classroom business, it is important to discover how students perceive TA immediacy and gain some idea as to future training procedures which could be employed to raise TAs' awareness of their own immediacy levels and work toward employing more immediacy in the classroom to stimulate a positive learning environment.

The communication classroom focuses on instructors' abilities to communicate effectively with students, however nonverbal communication sometimes is overlooked. Past studies have tried to bridge the gap in instructor communication using both verbal and non-verbal communication tactics (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Christophel, 1990; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990). Golish (1999) contends one teaching strategy TAs do not take into account is who has the power role in instructional settings, stating that often TAs allow students to undermine their credibility as an instructor thus usurping the TAs right to hold power in the classroom. Studies show a great amount of uncertainty or fear felt by TAs when beginning their career is how to establish credibility in the classroom (Hendrix, 1995). There are many reasons a TA may feel unsure of how to earn control in the classroom such as age, lack of experience, and or lack of training (Golish, 1999).

The objective of this study is to use the findings of this research in guiding TAs' teaching strategies when beginning their careers so that in future circumstances they can improve on immediacy behaviors and relate to the perceptions of students in order to gain compliance of students while in the classroom setting. It is also important to identify if students perceive differences between male and female TAs' use of immediacy in hopes to relate information to TAs within the realms of gender. The intent of this project is that TAs will use information found in this study to be more effective teachers and better understand student perceptions and expectations.

Literature Review

There is a need for more research to be sought in the area of training graduate teaching assistants due to their ever growing numbers in Universities (Williams & Roach, 1993). Shannon, Twale and Moore (1998) claimed TAs are assigned to lead or facilitate undergraduate classes by their department chairs without ever having been trained in any capacity in the area of educational instruction. Research shows almost half of TAs reported never having attended a teacher workshop or preparation course (Bomotti, 1994). Of those 53% reporting some type of training, 75% of those TAs reported training took less than one week's time (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1991). Some universities have teamed with faculty members to offer mentorship, however, many TAs report limited availability or time to talk with mentor due to most faculty "publish or perish" restraints (Shannon, Twale, & Moore, 1998). Terenzini and Pascarella (1994) contend even faculty need training as badly as TAs because so little importance is placed on the actual teaching.

With little time or monies appropriated to TA training, studies on the need for fast, effective training have been performed in order to discover how to best train TAs quickly and efficiently in order to give them the tools they need to facilitate learning in undergraduate classrooms (Bumotti, 1994; Shannon, Twale & Moore, 1998).

While literature has been developed to aid in training the TA in classroom management techniques (McGlynn, 2001; Priety & Myers, 2001), many TAs are unaware these materials exist, or do not have access to them (Lowman & Mathie, 1993). The TA manual individual universities often provide for TAs often become the first resource TAs turn to when searching for help with teaching or classroom management (Lowman & Mathie, 1993). These manuals often provide much necessary information which is vital to TAs success in the classroom. Past TA handbooks have typically included six main categories of material offered by Bailey in 1987. These include: 1) administrative issues, 2) "professional teaching issues and strategies," (p. 85) 3) TA relationships, 4) campus resources, 5) instructional responsibilities, and finally 6) student learning styles. Lowman & Mathie (1993) discovered TAs are most concerned with four topics including interpersonal, intellectual, professional socialization and organizational. Though literature shows TA manuals and handbooks cover much of what TAs feel they need to know to be successful in the classroom, Lowman & Mathie (1993) caution against universities relying solely on these to train their TAs because much of what makes TAs successful in not included in the training handbooks, nor do TAs realize for which areas they should be trained.

Interpersonal skills are an area proven to be difficult in which to train and important for instructors to know (Meredith, 1985). One very important aspect of interpersonal communication is immediacy. Albert Mehrabian (1969), considered to be the ground-breaking scholar on immediacy research, found those who reflect immediacy behaviors also send signals of positive attitude toward the receiver. Immediacy, as defined by Mehrabian, is communication in which closeness is enhanced to another. According to Anderson (1979) non-verbal immediacy behaviors include: smiling, proximity, movement, eye contact, relaxed position of body, and directing body position toward students. Anderson (1979) also found students were positively affected toward course, teacher communication, the course instructor, content of the course, and the overall course in general by those instructors who engaged in high immediacy.

While many studies have been conducted to discover instructor immediacy and its effects on students' classroom performance (Frymier, 1994; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990; Christobel, 1990; Menzel & Carrell, 1999), the research is lacking in students perceptions of nonverbal immediacy in teaching assistants. Sanders & Wiseman (1990) note nonverbal immediacy of teachers has a "positive effect on perceived cognitive learning, student affect, and behavioral intent (p. 341). Another study revealed overall "students' affective learning" was positively related to their perceptions of nonverbal immediacy demonstrated by the teacher (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey & Richmond, 1989). Kelley and Gorham (1988) found a positive relationship between short-term cognitive recall in regards to immediacy defined by physical proximity and eye contact. The study found recall was greatest when instructors demonstrated eye contact and close physical proximity.

It is important to determine students' perceived nonverbal immediacy behaviors of graduate TAs in order to further develop training practices and procedures among universities who employ TAs. Studies have shown race and gender to be of importance when determining

perceived immediacy among instructors as well. Sanders and Wiseman (1990) conducted important research to determine if perceptions of immediacy differed among students who varied in race and found immediacy to be positively associated among all groups. A study by Collier and Powell (1986) also found teaching effectiveness was related to teacher immediacy regardless of students' ethnicity. Sandler (1991) reported gender impacts how we view a person's ability in the classroom. Competence and credibility, an important aspect of learning and immediacy behaviors, demonstrated by instructors significantly impacted overall cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning (Frymier & Thompson, 1992).

Rationale

Upon review of the literature, one can see how a deeper understanding and better setup for TA training is a relevant need for the future of students. The lack of understanding educational instruction and classroom facilitation generates an unprepared teacher (Bomotti, 1994). The materials are existent but unavailable to TAs for lack of monetary funds, time availability, and structure for the framing of our classrooms. There is a limited amount of content used in TA training. According to Shannon, Twale, and Moore (1998), most of training is dedicated to university and departmental policies and fail to examine instructive techniques. Skills, such as nonverbal immediacy, can help enhance learning and relate students to formalizing a better understanding of the material because it generates a better student-teacher relationship (Lowman & Mathie, 1993).

Interpersonal skills enhance the way students learn and direct what they accomplish. Through the improvement of interpersonal intelligence TAs can gain not only higher student achievement but also better student evaluations (Christophel, 1990). Also, immediacy behaviors are an excellent motivator for students to participate and understand classroom materials. The knowledge of effective teaching skills is irreplaceable in the enhancement of student cognitive and affective learning.

Though there are studies examining the differences in gender when examining teaching (Bennett, 1982) only one was found to examine gender's relationship to immediacy in the classroom. Menzel and Carrell (1999) examine the differences perceptions of male and female students have of their male or female instructors. They found male students perceived to learn more from male teachers and female students perceived to learn more from female teachers. Also, examining nonverbal immediacy, researchers found that perceived learning was significantly proportioned to the level of nonverbal immediacy demonstrated in the classroom. This study seeks to open up more research for this phenomena by examining this information in TAs and their students while focusing on gender as aspect of immediacy differentiation.

RQ1: What are the levels of TA nonverbal immediacy as perceived by their undergraduate college students?

RQ2: Will *male* college student's perception of nonverbal immediacy differ between male and female TA's?

RQ3: Will *female* college student's perception of nonverbal immediacy differ between male and
female TA's?

Method

Participants consisted of 226 undergraduate students, 123 males (54%) and 103 females (46%), enrolled in various communication studies courses at a large southwestern university.

The students were enrolled and attending a course that uses TA's for the main lectures of the course. TA participants consisted of 5 females and 4 males. A survey was administered in large lecture (class where students meet with head course director) asking students to participate in a small questionnaire in regards to their specific TA. The questionnaire consisted of 33 questions, 4 of which were demographic questions. The questionnaire is located in Appendix A.

The Behavioral Indicants of Immediacy (BII) scale, instructional context (Anderson, Anderson, & Jensen 1979) was adapted for use with TAs in this study (See Appendix A). Cronbach reliability for the BII scale was found to be .92 (Anderson et al., 1979). The only information changed in the questionnaire was the insertion of the word "teaching assistant" in the space previously occupied by "professor". Also, 4 demographic questions were inserted for difference testing between male and female student's opinions of TAs. The questionnaire was setup on a Likert type scale where (7) strongly agree; (6) agree; (5) moderately agree; (4) are undecided; (3) moderately disagree; (2) disagree; or (1) strongly disagree.

Participants were solicited orally and participated on voluntary bases. A 10 minute waiting period was given for responses to be recorded and returned. After responses were returned the qualitative data was then compiled, set up, and then graphed for comparison. This data is that which will be used in depicting differences between demographics.

The demographic questions were used to help in understanding common cases of gender influence in teaching effectiveness and will help in examining student perceptions of same sex and opposite sex TA's. T-tests were run to in order to measure difference between male and females student's perceptions of their same sex or opposite sex TA.

Results

In order to discover the levels of TA nonverbal immediacy and answer RQ1, a one-way ANOVA was performed and an overall immediacy score (M = 76.15, SD = 10.37) which was consistent with immediacy scores from previous research measuring instructor nonverbal immediacy (Gorham & Zakahi, 1990). A Post Hoc Tukey test using multiple comparisons were then assessed to discover if there were significant differences among classification of students. It is interesting to note Junior (71.05) students reported TAs having significantly lower levels of nonverbal immediacy than did Freshmen (78.5) and Sophomore (76.4) students in this context.

In order to discover answers to RQ2 and RQ3 an independent samples t-tests were completed between male and female respondents. Findings for research question 2 showed male students scored male TAs (M=77.96, SD= 9.36, p<.05), higher for nonverbal immediacy than females (M=74.18, SD= 10.71, p<.05) however no significant difference was found between the two. Research question 3 which assessed female respondents' perception of nonverbal immediacy score found female TAs (M=80.446, SD=9.42, p<.05) to have a higher nonverbal immediacy score than male TAs (M=73.95, SD=10.33, p<.05).

Discussion

Understanding how male and female TA's are perceived in their use of nonverbal immediacy by their male and female student counterparts can be seen as an important issue when formatting strategies and pedagogies for teaching. The literature dictates a higher cognitive and affective learning of students with teachers who use more immediacy. How students perceive these instances of nonverbal immediacy can determine TA's perception of how to be more immediate in the classroom.

It is interesting that male and female students perceive same sex TA's as having a higher nonverbal immediacy. This is assumed to be because of the different communication patterns of males and females and how one relates to each according to Menzel and Carrell's (1999) article on immediacy. For instance, males are more apt to understanding the communication patterns of males better because they use the same process of thinking. In educating TA's about how to use immediacy and its importance, focusing on how student's perception influences that immediacy, is something that should be taught to TA's.

This is just one instance in which TA's need better training to achieve better student learning. An increase in the teaching strategies setup by universities is a much needed advance to today's preconstruction in facilitating proper learning environments. An increase in these types of learning stratagems will produce a better environment for both student and teacher.

Future Research/Limitations

Additional research is needed to discover why males and females view male and female TAs respectively as having higher nonverbal immediacy. While the immediacy scale used is designed to test TA nonverbal immediacy with past instructors, it is not clear if past instructors are professors or other TAs. Future research could clarify this ambiguity to give a better picture as to whom TAs are being compared.

Finally, examining further into how males and females use immediacy differently would help in deciphering what students respond to. For instance females might use more touch and males might use more body positioning in determining nonverbal immediacy. Finding this out will help determine what communication patterns students respond to.

Limitations include the small number of TAs who were assessed during this study. A better understanding of TA immediacy might have surfaced had more TAs been the subjects under scrutiny. Also, measuring nonverbal immediacy of TAs from other departments may have helped to determine if nonverbal immediacy differs significantly across fields of study.

Also a comparison of ethnicity and immediacy use would help us in understanding if different ethnicities are seen as being different in how they use immediacy. Also researchers hope to examine if there is a difference in interpretation of within group-without group perceptions as dictated by ethnicity.

Conclusion

Discovering nonverbal immediacy TAs demonstrate while engaged in teaching undergraduate college courses is important for the development of training practices for future TAs. The challenge of training TAs for the college classroom setting has long been the focus of research. However little research has pinpointed if there are differences between male and female TA immediacy and the effects this has on students. This research accepts the challenge of discovering these differences. Acknowledging and addressing these differences could be the next step in furthering TA training. By teaching TAs their nonverbal immediacy is an important part of effective teaching; we can help provide a better education to students as well as have more successful TAs. Shannon et al. (1998) claimed implementing new training ideas and programs are difficult, but with more research which highlights the importance of training men and women to be aware of their own immediacy behaviors, further emphasis on the need can be attained, thus highlighting the need for new training.

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Table 1

Nonverbal Classification Measures

Classification	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Freshman	104	78.51	9.40
Sophomore	77	76.49	10.28
Junior	39	71.05	9.29
Senior	25	73.24	12.933
Total	245	76.15	10.37

Table 2

Nonverbal Immediacy Between Male and Female Teaching Assistants

Sex of Student	Sex of TA	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male				
	Male	50	77.96	9.36
	Female	83	74.18	10.72
Female				
	Male	52	73.95	10.33
	Female	47	80.45	9.42

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Directions: Please complete questions 1-4 below. These preliminary questions will help us determine the characteristics of our subjects. Results will be kept confidential.

1. Gender (circle one): Male Female
2. University Classification: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior
3. Ethnicity: American Indian/Alaskan Native Asian/Pacific Islander Black Caucasian/White Hispanic Other
4. Major: _____

Directions continued: The following questions are designed to help us measure how you perceive your instructor in the teaching role. Please respond to each question using the teaching assistant (henceforth referred to as TA) assigned to your discussion section of the large lecture class for which you are currently attending. Please mark statement 5 to indicate sex of TA leading the discussion in which you are assigned. Please mark the statements 6-32 to indicate whether you:

(7) strongly agree; **(6)** agree; **(5)** moderately agree; **(4)** are undecided; **(3)** moderately disagree; **(2)** disagree; or **(1)** strongly disagree. Please record the number of your response in the space provided beside each statement. There is no correct answer. Simply record your perceptions. Some of the questions may seem similar, but this is necessary.

_____ 5. My teaching assistant (TA) is 1) Male 2) Female

_____6. This TA engages in more eye contact with me when teaching than most other instructors.

_____7. Students discuss less in this class than most other classes.

_____ 8. This TA has a more tense body position while teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 9. This TA engages in less movement while teaching than most other instructors.

_____10. This TA sits in a student desk less than most other instructors when teaching.

_____ 11. This TA touches students less than most other instructors when teaching.

_____ 12. This TA has a more relaxed body position while teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 13. This TA directs his/her body position more toward students while teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 14. This instructor stands in front of the classroom less than most other instructors while teaching.

_____ 15. This TA smiles more during class than most other instructors.

_____ 16. This TA dresses less formally than most other instructors when teaching.

_____ 17. This TA engages in less eye contact with me when teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 18. This TA spends less time with students before and after class than most instructors.

_____ 19. This TA touches students more than most other instructors when teaching.

_____ 20. Students discuss more in this class than in most other classes.

_____ 21. This TA is more vocally expressive while teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 22. This TA is more distant from students while teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 23. This TA directs his/her body position less toward students while teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 24. This TA gestures less while teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 25. This TA engages in more movement while teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 26. This TA sits in a student desk more often than most other instructors while teaching.

_____ 27. This TA dress more informally than most other instructors when teaching.

_____ 28. This TA stands in front of the classroom more than most other instructors while teaching.

_____ 29. This TA is less vocally expressive while teaching than most other instructors.

_____ 30. This TA smiles less during class than most other instructors.

_____ 31. This TA is less distant from students than most other instructors while teaching.

_____ 32. This TA spends more time with students before and after class than most other instructors.

_____ 33. This TA gestures more while teaching than most other instructors.

Thank you for your participation!