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The Enhancement of Verbal Immediacy in Online University Classes: A Student-Generated Taxonomy

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The goal of this research was to find written strategies online educators can use to create higher levels of immediacy between themselves and their students. Written strategies are simple and do not require anything other than e-mail or a feedback textbox. Students (*N* = 194) completed open-ended surveys asking them to list examples of written communication used by online instructors that created a sense of closeness. A subset of the data was independently coded by the authors to induce a set of 13 categories, some of which were unique to this study, in not being discovered in previous research. All of the surveys were coded using the agreed on categories. Statistical analysis suggested strategies students favored the most: encouragement, personalized feedback, and instructor availability. Other analyses also showed that such immediacy variables were associated with factors such as attitude toward online classes and tendency to enroll in them.

Keywords: *online immediacy, verbal strategies, affective learning, cognitive learning, online attitudes, online enrollment*

In the past 20 years, online education has moved from a novelty to the mainstream. Today, many universities offer at least a few online classes, and some universities offer whole degree programs online. For example, the number of universities that are primarily online institutions has risen from 56 (1.2%) in 2012 to 80 (1.8%) in 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017c). In addition, the undergraduate students enrolled in at least some distance education or online classes rose from 15.6% in 2003–4 to 43.1% in 2015–16, and this percentage rise has been virtually identical for graduate students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a, 2017b). The rise in online education has left some instructors struggling to replicate the same level of immediacy, or a sense of psychological closeness, with their students that they take for granted in face-to-face (FtF) classes. In a classroom, the nonverbal cues are used easily to communicate messages of liking and warmth, but online courses often lack these cues. The emphasis instead is on written content with greatly diminished one-on-one interaction and largely absent nonverbal messages.

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Despite the difficulty of creating immediacy in an online environment, instructors still need to find ways to build psychological closeness with their online students. This problem motivated us to examine strategies for increasing immediacy in online classes.

Literature Review

Immediacy: Definition and Outcomes

Despite these limitations that online classes present, it is important for instructors to establish a sense of immediacy with their students. Previous studies have demonstrated the efficacy of immediacy in producing outcomes such as increased affective, and in some cases, cognitive learning (e.g., Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007; Pogue & Ahyun, 2006). In this exploratory study, we hope to build on the existing research (e.g., Baker, 2004; Comadena et al., 2007; Conaway, Easton, & Schmidt, 2005; Pogue & Ahyun, 2006; Trad, Katt, & Miller, 2014) to examine how instructors can increase levels of immediacy in online classes. We are specifically interested in verbal (written) strategies instructors can use to increase immediacy. We are interested in verbal strategies because (a) there are often limited resources available to online university instructors for increasing emphasis on the nonverbal channel, and (b) even when such resources exist, it is inevitable that some instructors will choose not to use them. Our goal is to add to the extant literature related to online immediacy and explore ways that instructors can enhance student motivation and learning in online courses. Because of the paucity of research on verbal strategies, we have chosen to do a study that is largely exploratory.

Mehrabian (1971) defined immediacy as any behavior that increases psychological closeness between people. In a traditional classroom context, instructors can use various nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, forward body orientation, smiles, and nods. All of these nonverbal behaviors are important because they have been shown to have a positive effect on student information seeking (Pogue & Ahyun, 2006). Mehrabian (1971) also noted that immediacy can be created using verbal strategies. For example, instructors may use humor, share personal stories, ask questions, use inclusive pronouns such as "us" or "we," or address students via their first names in an attempt to create a sense of psychological closeness. These behaviors, coupled with how often and at which times the instructor chooses to contact the student, affect perceptions of immediacy (Mathieson & Leafman, 2014). High levels of instructor immediacy behavior have been shown to positively affect perceptions of teacher credibility and both affective and cognitive student learning (Baker, 2004; Comadena et al., 2007; Pogue & Ahyun, 2006; Trad et al., 2014).

Trad et al. (2014) speculated that immediacy might have a mediating effect on instructor credibility. They stated that credible instructors are better able to demonstrate the importance and the value of the course to the students, and thus more immediate instructors should be able to encourage motivation and participation in learning activities. It would stand to reason that if students are more engaged, both affective and cognitive learning would increase. Thus, instructor immediacy is important because it affects both instructor credibility and student motivation.

In addition, Pogue and Ahyun (2006) noted that teachers who are perceived to be higher in levels of immediacy are also more easily forgiven by their students for mistakes or problems. This is yet another

benefit of high levels of immediacy behavior. If an instructor failed to respond quickly once or had a course functionality issue, the "credit" created by the use of high levels of immediacy would offset the negative event and would not damage the instructor–student relationship. This is an important factor to consider because there are times when instructors encounter problems outside of their control, such as slow university servers, negative feedback on student work, online educational platform problems, and the like. High levels of immediacy can protect the teacher–student relationship, thus keeping intact positive student perceptions of instructor trust, credibility, and good will, all of which have been shown to affect student motivation and student affective learning (Pogue & Ahyun, 2006).

Related to the notion of a positive teacher–student relationship, Comadena et al. (2007) suggested that high levels of teacher immediacy combined with caring should increase student motivation. In their study, immediacy and caring resulted in various benefits for both the instructor and the students. For example, instructors and their courses were rated more favorably, and students experienced higher levels of cognitive learning. As cited by Plante and Asselin (2014), Lener and Sitzman suggested that increased immediacy results in higher self-esteem for the student and higher retention rates. Thus, it appears that high levels of instructor immediacy have various benefits for both teacher and student.

Immediacy and Distance Learning

Other researchers have explored the importance of social presence and immediacy in a distance-learning environment. According to Schutt, Allen, and Laumakis (2009), social presence is a concept that can be considered as closely related to immediacy. The concept is derived from social presence theory, developed by Short, Williams, and Christie (1993). This concept can be defined as the involvement of an individual in an interaction. The idea is that both parties are aware of and involved in the interaction and the relationship. In simpler terms, both parties perceive one another to be a real person with emotional awareness of the other (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Sung & Mayer, 2012). It is important to clarify that although social presence is critical, it is not related directly to the academic content of the class. It is, instead, the cohesion, interaction, and affective communication that occurs in the course of the class (Mathieson & Leafman, 2014). Because cohesion, interaction, and affective communication are greatly diminished via online media, the FtF class would have high potential for the creation of social presence via interaction, whereas an online text-based asynchronous class would have less potential for the creation of social presence via interaction. In other words, social presence can be created in such an online environment because interaction is possible there, but the difficulty of doing so should be greater than in an FtF environment, in part because there are fewer and less powerful cues indicating involvement. The implications of this for the learner and instructor are profound.

Schutt et al. (2009) noted that previous research suggested that social presence affects "learning, interaction, interpersonal relationships, and user satisfaction" (p. 137), whereas Rifkind (1992) found that a lack of social presence can lead to learner frustration (as reported by Mykota, 2015). Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) found not only that social presence (especially its immediacy-related aspects) strongly influenced satisfaction of participants in an online text-based community but also that this depended in part on the nature of the contributions made by moderators within the community. One study in particular used previous research to develop the Online Social Presence Questionnaire (OSPQ). The OSPQ assesses students'

perceptions of social presence from both peers and instructors and consists of a series of 19 questions across five categories with a Likert-type response scale. These five categories are (1) social respect—learner ideas are appreciated, acknowledged in a timely manner, conversations occur; (2) social sharing—perception of a close relationship with the instructor, feeling of safety and encouragement to share; (3) open mind—points of view are shared openly with active discussion and discourse, positive feedback is given; (4) social identity—strongly focuses on the use of individual and team names to foster a sense of individuality; and (5) intimacy—sharing personal life stories and emotions (Sung & Mayer, 2012). The results of the study reinforced previous findings that student perceptions of instructor and peer immediacy strongly influence overall course satisfaction (e.g., Plante & Asselin, 2014). Of note, this study was conducted in Korea at a Korean University, so it is assumed that cultural differences could present a distinct limitation on generalizability. Furthermore, this survey format did not allow students to express their unique point of view or insight into social presence indicators. The current study attempts to overcome that particular limitation of the OSPQ study.

Immediacy and Verbal Strategies

Given the significance of student satisfaction, research that provides insight into how instructors may be able to increase the amount of social presence, immediacy, and closeness with their students is invaluable. Schutt and colleagues (2009) suggested that video and audio are easy ways for instructors to demonstrate immediacy behaviors in a distance-learning class. However, although this is a valuable finding, not all instructors will have the ability or desire to use such a method to increase immediacy. Additionally, with the ever-expanding number of platforms available to access the Internet, it cannot be guaranteed that a video will function properly.

So, are there any strictly verbal strategies that can be used to increase student perceptions of instructor immediacy? Trad and associates (2014) suggested the use of face threat mitigation techniques. Face threat mitigation (FTM) is a component of politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978) and involves the construction of verbal messages that mitigate or reduce the threat to a student's face when giving a potentially face threatening message. Essentially, the instructor is sensitive to the student's face, or social identity, when constructing a message. The goal of the message would be to provide accurate and helpful feedback without damaging the other's social identity. Facework involves a collaboration between the individuals in the interaction to meet the needs of the situation and to do so in such a way that both feel their social identity is respected. Research (see below) has indicated that FTM is predictive of both instructor credibility and affective learning. Trad and colleagues (2014) suggested that "it is possible for FTM alone in text only courses . . . [to] exert just as strong an influence on instructor credibility and student motivation as a message with nonverbal components like videos" (p. 143). This demonstrates the importance of the carefully crafted message that communicates the appropriate critique of the work, but in such a way that it is still sensitive to students' face needs.

Other research also found similar effective verbal strategies for increasing perceptions of immediacy (Baker, 2004; Dupin-Bryant, 2004). These strategies were categorized by Dupin-Bryant (2004) as rapport, recognition, and feedback. In rapport, instructors set the tone of the course from the very beginning by how they choose to word their biographical information and the picture that is included

in their personal introductions. Through informal language and offering some self-disclosure, the instructor can increase feelings of closeness. Furthermore, the use of humor and a lack of formality can also help students feel closer to instructors. Of interest, one study suggested that female students are more influenced by the use of rapport than male students when examining affective learning, but the study was quick to point out also that other unaccounted for factors might have influenced these findings (Fisher & Katt, 2007). In recognition, personalized e-mails that reference students' names or something specific to their classroom contributions can increase perceptions of social presence and immediacy. In feedback, instructors may want to use such items as daily e-mails or other reminders of assignments, announcements, or other updates and chat rooms in which students can interact during virtual office hours. On this note, in one survey, students cited prompt e-mail replies as the number-one immediacy gaining strategy (Plante & Asselin, 2014). Other feedback strategies include using discussion board postings and prompt grading responses to students.

These are all strictly verbal channels, and they can be easily incorporated into routine responses to student questions and assignments. Creating an environment that fosters a sense of individual value and support will enhance student motivation to participate in the course. This should result in a more positive learning experience for both the instructor and the students.

Rationale

Based on the previous literature, we wanted to explore what verbal (written) strategies online instructors could use to create a sense of immediacy with their students. Furthermore, because we know of no attempt to induce categories of online written immediacy behaviors from student reports, we used a mostly open-ended survey to allow for just that. According to extant literature, it appears plausible and probable that there should be significant relationships between even strictly written methods of enhancing immediacy in online environments and positive outcomes. We sought to collect student-generated examples of both actual and suggested verbal strategies instructors do and should use to create a sense of closeness with their students. This would allow us to both formulate a taxonomy of such written behaviors and explore their connections to some other variables. We also hope to fill the void in research that deals specifically with student-generated methods for increasing teacher immediacy in either FtF or online classes. The research on instructional immediacy is plentiful (see literature review above), but it is lacking in approaches built directly on student perceptions. Given that immediacy is a relational variable, it would seem that such an approach is needed as a way of confirming, adding to, and/or modifying expert-generated methods. Pedagogical research on topics other than immediacy clearly show the relevance and importance of student-generated versions of key concepts and behaviors (Boyle & Weishaar, 1997; Campbell, 1987; Pittenger & Lounsbery, 2011; Pittman, 1999).

Research Questions

Because of the paucity of research on this specific topic, we present this work as an exploratory study to accomplish these modest goals, suggested by two general research questions.

RQ1: *What fundamental written methods do students perceive as being important to increasing instructor immediacy in online university classes?*

RQ2: *Do these methods correlate with selected variables that are important to those students and to those who offer online classes?*

Method

Participants

Participants (*N* = 194) were recruited using a network sampling technique and completed a survey distributed to them on paper. Students in FtF communication studies classes at a southern university were asked to complete a survey dealing with perceptions of immediacy with online university instructors and were also asked to recruit two additional university students who had not yet completed the survey. There were 123 females in the sample, 69 males, and two individuals who did not indicate their sex. Most of the participants were university seniors (48%), with graduate students making up the smallest part of the sample (3%). Juniors (27%), sophomores (14%), and freshmen (7%) rounded out the sample. One percent of the participants did not report their classifications. These students hailed from various major and minor programs of study. The mean age of students in the sample was 22.01 years (*SD* = 3.25 years), with ages that ranged from 18 to 48 years. In terms of ethnicity, approximately 57% identified themselves as White, 19% as African American, 20% as Hispanic, 2% as Asian, less than 1% as Native American, and 2% as some other ethnicity. The mean number of online classes that participants had taken was 2.78 (*SD* = 2.67, minimum of zero and maximum of 14).

Procedure

Because of the nature of the study as exploratory, a mostly open-ended survey was used to gather information about "how online instructors use written communication to establish and maintain psychological closeness between themselves and their students" (see the Appendix). If participants had taken at least one online class, they were asked to list as many actual examples as they could of "teachers' written words, phrases, emoticons, and/or messages" that helped to maintain or increase this sense of closeness. If no online classes had been taken, participants were instructed to proceed immediately to the next question on the following page, where they were asked to list hypothetical examples of similar acts of teacher written communication that they believed would foster closeness. (All participants were instructed to complete this section that focused on hypothetical suggestions.) The final item was a single closed-ended item that asked participants to indicate how negatively or positively they generally felt about online classes. This was a 7-point Likert-type item ranging from 1 (*very negatively*) to 7 (*very positively*). The survey was also used to gather biographical information about participants (see previous paragraph). Approval for this project was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board before any data were collected.

Results

Data Analysis and RQ1

Analysis of these survey data occurred in three distinct steps. In the first step, two of the authors independently examined a subset of the surveys (approximately 20%) with the goal of inducing analytically a set of categories representing written methods that students believed would enhance online instructor immediacy. Each of the authors formulated between 20 and 25 such categories. The authors met to discuss these independent findings, shared their sets of categories, then conferred to eliminate overlap and to rule out categories with particularly small numbers of occurrences in the data. This process followed procedures used previously in the work of Bello, Brandau-Brown, Zhang, and Ragsdale (2010) and in the work of Kline, Horton, and Zhang (2008). It resulted in a total of 13 immediacy-related methods that students perceived that instructors used or should use, which provided a fundamental answer to RQ1. The "actual" and "hypothetical" data (see "Procedure" section above) were analyzed separately during this step. Careful examination of both the actual and hypothetical responses revealed that all 13 categories emerged consistently in both of these sets of data. Once these categories were agreed on, each individual item in the same subset of surveys was coded independently by the authors using the category system. Percentage of coding agreement was .81, and discussion was used to resolve the differences that remained. (See Table 1 for the list of methods with examples of each.)

Table 1. Immediacy Enhancing Methods Derived From Survey Results.

Method	Examples
1. Availability	"Call or e-mail whenever you have questions."
2. Course functionality	"Used discussion board for general questions."
3. Emoticons	"Used smiley faces."
4. Encouragement	"Great job!"; "Keep up the good work!"
5. Expressions of empathy	"Questions showing concern for grades."
6. General affirmation	"I hope you had a great weekend!"
7. Informality	"Use of informal name (e.g., Dr. J)."
8. Personalized feedback	"Gave feedback about grades," "Hi (my name)."
9. Professors' bio info	"A brief bio of herself at the start of the semester."
10. Quick communication	"She responded quickly to e-mails."
11. Reminders	"Weekly e-mails reminding us what's due soon."
12. Things to avoid	"Almost never communicated with us."
13. Video/audio materials	"Have videos explaining units/chapters."

Note that Methods 12 and 13 do not fit the survey instruction to list written examples, but were included in the present study nevertheless because participants listed occurrences of them fairly often. In the future, our focus will be elsewhere—in fact, we are currently involved in a data collection using the Table 1 taxonomy, but excluding Methods 12 and 13. Although there is some disagreement about whether emoticons should be thought of as verbal or nonverbal, we have decided to continue using them in our current data collection because they are part and parcel of the writing process, unlike Methods 12 and 13. See Yuasa, Saito, and Mukawa (2011) for an explication of an in-between approach to emoticons, based on

measures of brain activity when reading sentences with and without emoticons. We find this approach to emoticons to be correct and compelling, and thus we have chosen to keep them in our taxonomy. Because they are a written form of communication, they clearly fall within the parameters of written methods for enhancing immediacy. It is clear that emoticons fulfill a unique role of being perceived as both verbal signs and as imagery (Yuasa et al., 2011). Emoticons are commonly accepted forms of written communication—yet another reason for including them in the taxonomy.

In the second step, we coded the data from all 194 surveys using the system of 13 method categories. We listed each method twice (actual and hypothetical) as a separate variable in an SPSS (Version 22) data set, resulting in 26 variables representing (mostly) written instructor immediacy methods, and we input the coded data into that data set. For example, if a given participant listed two actual examples of personalized feedback and one hypothetical example of informality, we input that as 2 for the "actual personalized feedback" variable and 1 for the "hypothetical informality" variable, and input 0 for the remaining 24 variables. If a participant had taken no online classes, and so did not complete the survey section asking for actual examples, the "actual" variables were coded as missing.

In the third step, we subjected these data to various descriptive and inferential analyses. We next discuss these analyses and their results.

Other Results

To explore in more depth the system of methods uncovered to answer RQ1, we used a related-samples Friedman's ANOVA to test the null hypothesis that ensures each of the methods would be evenly distributed by chance across all of the methods. (This test is appropriate, according to SPSS, for use with several kinds of data, including the discrete measurement data represented by the counts associated with each of the methods.) Because we suspected that some of the immediacy methods would be favored by students more than others, we expected this test to allow for the rejection of the null hypothesis. In fact, this was true, both for the distribution of counts across the actual methods and the hypothetical methods ($p < .001$ in both cases). Which of the methods were more favored and which were least favored? The answer is fairly similar for the actual and the hypothetical data. In both sets of data, three methods were most chosen by participants, with means approaching or exceeding .50 for all of them. For the actual data, these were encouragement ($M = .59$, $SD = 1.13$), personalized feedback ($M = .51$, $SD = .79$), and availability ($M = .46$, $SD = .88$). A series of Wilcoxon signed-rank tests showed no significant difference between any of these top three listed methods. Those same tests showed significant differences between each of these methods and virtually all of the other actual methods. The same three were also the most common in the hypothetical data, but in a slightly different order: availability ($M = .71$, $SD = 1.04$), encouragement ($M = .67$, $SD = 1.04$), and personalized feedback ($M = .52$, $SD = .74$). Again, as with the actual methods, application of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test demonstrated no significant difference between any of these three hypothetical methods, but significant differences between each of them and all of the other hypothetical methods. The fact that these were the most commonly mentioned methods in the actual and hypothetical data suggests that participants not only consider them especially important for enhancing immediacy in online classes they have had, but that they also want to see more such messages from instructors in future classes. This is especially underlined by the higher means for each of the methods in

the hypothetical data as compared with the actual. Though with less consistency across actual and hypothetical data, the relatively least mentioned methods, as judged by means hovering close to or just above .20, were quick communication, emoticons, professor's biographical information, informality, and things to avoid.

Data Analysis and RQ2

We conducted correlational analyses that were indicative of some of the important connections between variables. First, there was a positive correlation between the number of online classes taken and the attitude toward online classes in general (r = .36, p < .001). This suggests that some students are avoiding online classes because of negative experiences they have had with at least one of them, perhaps associated with lack of immediacy, which then could be fostering negative attitudes. Second, there was a positive correlation between the total count of actual immediacy items for each participant (but not hypothetical ones) and attitude toward online classes (r = .20, p = .02). There was also a similar correlation involving the grand total count of immediacy items and attitude toward online classes (r = .20, p = .005). This second set of findings suggests that it is likely that all or most of the items in the taxonomy have at least some influence in enhancing immediacy, beyond merely the three most commonly reported by students. In other words, when participants listed fewer immediacy items, especially those they had noticed in actual online classes, they had less favorable attitudes toward such classes, a fact that supports the interpretation of the first correlation mentioned above.

Finally, based both on expectations derived from previous research and the results of the related-samples Friedman's ANOVA, we conducted a series of multiple linear regressions with most of the immediacy method variables as the predictors, and with the frequency of online classes as a measure of tendency to enroll in online classes as the outcome variable. Regression is statistically justified in this case. First, the count data in the present study are measuring independent variables. There are no assumptions about either the type (nominal or numerical) or distribution of independent variable data in regression. These count data can be thought of as a special case of a measurement (numerical) variable that is discrete rather than continuous—that is, the number of occurrences within a particular category of immediacy behaviors. Further and more detailed discussion of these issues regarding the legitimacy of independent variable data can be found elsewhere (Grace-Martin, 2017; McDonald, 2014). We had reason to suspect that certain of the immediacy variables (such as encouragement and personalized feedback) would be more predictive than others, and this turned out to be the case. (Because they were neither asked for on the survey nor theoretically related to the issue being investigated, we chose to leave out video material and things to avoid as predictors in these equations.)

The actual immediacy variables produced a significantly predictive model, F(11, 117) = 1.80, p = .03, R-squared = .15. The significant individual predictors were encouragement (B = .18, p = .04), personalized feedback (B = .21, p = .008), and course functionality (B = .14, p = .05). In each case, increased levels of these variables predicted more online classes being taken. The hypothetical immediacy variables also produced a significant model, F(11, 171) = 2.17, p = .009, R-squared = .12. Significant individual predictors were encouragement (B = .27, p < .001), emoticons (B = −.21, p = .005), and informality (B = .13, p = .04). Note that greater levels of encouragement and informality were predictive

of more online classes taken, but the negative coefficient for emoticons indicates that, thinking hypothetically, participants who had more online classes wanted fewer of these.

Discussion

The data reported in this study have several implications. One of the first is that, related to RQ1, it is possible to derive from students themselves a logical and workable taxonomy of simple written methods for enhancing instructor immediacy in online university classes. Because many university students are now digital natives, and therefore have been immersed in digital technologies from birth, it is important to develop and use student-generated taxonomies. This is especially true given that most of their professors are digital immigrants and might use these technologies quite differently than do the students. University online instructors can and probably should make use of the methods identified here, in addition to those derived from their own intuition and experiences, if they desire to enhance immediacy with students using straightforward, efficient, and cost effective means. In this regard, instructors should pay special (but not exclusive) attention to those methods that were shown to be the most commonly cited: encouragement, personalized feedback, and availability. Although these methods are often cited in instructional training sessions as being pedagogically important and as intuitive (e.g., Furlich, 2016; Kwitonda, 2017), this study appears to be unique in confirming their importance (a) according to digitally native students themselves and (b) as specifically related to immediacy in online courses. In addition, given the well-established significance of student engagement to academic learning (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), any set of instructor immediacy behaviors generated by students (not merely those that are expert generated) would appear to be especially valuable in enhancing the degree to which students remain engaged, particularly in an online learning environment. We suspect, although future research is needed for confirmation, that some of these student-generated immediacy behaviors could serve as a buffer for those students who are inclined to become disengaged. If the immediacy of the instructor can interest them enough to cause them to stay enrolled and gradually become engaged with the course and its material, this has implications for retention of students who are at risk for disengaging and ultimately leaving the program of study.

It is also worth asking how similar and/or dissimilar the taxonomy found in the present study is relative to research on teacher verbal behaviors in FtF classes. Because Gorham (1988) happened to compile student-generated types of verbal behaviors (and nonverbal ones) that would increase immediacy in the university classroom, her study is a good point of comparison. In general, there were similarities and differences in the two sets of findings. Specifically, the similarities in Gorham's (1988) 20-item taxonomy were five categories that were analogous to encouragement, personalized feedback, and availability in our taxonomy. They were "praises students' work, actions or comments" (encouragement); "addresses students by name," "addresses my by name," "provides feedback on my individual work through comments on papers, oral discussions, etc." (personalized feedback); and "invites students to telephone or meet with him/her outside of class if they have questions or want to discuss something" (availability; p. 44). It is intriguing that these five items from Gorham's work were the only similarities and that they were analogous to the three most commonly cited in our data. This suggests that there are ways of enhancing teacher immediacy through verbal means that are so fundamentally important they occur in both online and FtF settings. However, it is just as intriguing that all of the other verbally oriented items in our Table 1 had no similarities to the rest of Gorham's verbal data. This suggests that there are

ways of increasing teacher immediacy through verbal means that are crucial specifically to the online setting, adding to the salience of the present study.

Our strong suspicion, although it needs confirmation in future research, is that the three methods referred to directly above (and especially the first two) were the most prominent because they were among the most other-oriented of all the message types represented. Our expectation is that more research will show that such highly other-oriented messages work well in an online environment precisely because students typically feel that they are, as individuals, undervalued or not valued in this environment. This notion is evidenced by the basics of social presence theory (SPT) alluded to in the literature review above. Recall that SPT suggests that in a mediated environment, it can be important for both parties (rather than just one) to feel that they are cohesive, are in touch with one another, and have an emotional awareness of one another so that satisfaction in that environment can be enhanced (Short et al., 1993), and that this may be especially true in mediated learning environments (Mathieson & Leafman, 2014; Schutt et al., 2009; Sung & Mayer, 2012). A shorthand way of describing these elements of social presence is that an other-orientation exists, which is likely what is provided by the encouragement, personalized feedback, and availability immediacy behaviors uncovered in the present study.

Another theoretical underpinning for the finding that these three highly other-oriented message types were the most commonly cited by participants is one of the key components of politeness theory, discussed above in the literature review: FTM. Brown and Levinson (1978), the creators of politeness theory, posited that, when confronted with or constructing actual or potential face-threatening actions, individuals generally make use of message strategies designed to mitigate such threats to face. Logic, as well as the work of Trad and associates (2014) suggest that in the absence of nonverbal means for mitigating face threat, as in text-only online courses, instructors might need to be especially sensitive to the content and wording of written messages directed at students. Such sensitivity might help in fending off face threat before it ever occurs or lessening it after it does occur, especially considering that the nonverbal channel (e.g., facial expression and voice tone) is not available to soften messages and make them less likely to threaten face. Nor is it available to enhance immediacy (Trad et al., 2014). This alone suggests the need for highly other-oriented written messages, which would appear to be particularly effective at mitigating face threat in online education environments, especially when instructional critiques must be given to students (Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011). In addition to this lack of nonverbal means for FTM, it also seems likely that, at least for some students, online environments themselves are more fundamentally face-threatening because they are not very conducive to the establishment and maintenance of clear and positive social identities (Delahunty, 2012). So, for those students who perceive online environments in this manner, highly other-oriented messages would appear to be effective in enhancing the process of positive identity construction.

In addition, the first two of these methods would also appear to enhance a sense of instructor caring, which, when combined with immediacy (Comadena et al., 2007), produces a number of positive outcomes, including increased cognitive learning and student motivation.

Along those lines, and relative to RQ2, another implication is that the methods identified have the potential to enhance immediacy in such a way that they can be associated with other positive educational outcomes. The outcomes explored in this study included more favorable attitudes toward online classes and

the propensity to take them. What might account for these kinds of findings? It is likely that using positive verbal strategies such as personalized feedback, availability, and encouragement may result in the students feeling a high degree of instructor social presence, and that this enhanced social presence might have led to more favorable student attitudes and behaviors. As noted by Schutt et al. (2009), social presence has various positive impacts on learning, interaction, and user satisfaction. When students do not feel their instructor is engaged in the learning process, it can result in frustration and a lack of satisfaction (Mykota, 2015). Thus, it makes sense that the strategies cited by students as being most influential in creating immediacy with their instructor would be those that demonstrate a high degree of social presence.

In addition to social presence, the verbal strategies cited by students may also contribute to increased perceptions of teacher caring, and that this caring might have also led to more favorable student attitudes and behaviors. Teven (2001) found that teacher responsiveness and perceived caring had a strong positive correlation. This correlation could be explained by the fact that these two constructs are likely demonstrated by similar behaviors. For example, if a teacher is quick to respond, is available, initiates interactions with the student, offers personalized communication and feedback, addresses the student by name, and shows concern or empathy for the student's personal situation, these behaviors all make the student feel that the instructor cares about his or her well-being and is invested in that student's success. The feeling of being respected, significant, and a valued member of the class is also more likely to result in higher student motivation, higher likelihood of attendance, and higher likelihood of asking questions and for help. Thus, engaging in high levels of immediacy behaviors demonstrates the construct of caring and is a driving force in affective learning. Because online classes do not have the same types of opportunities for interaction as FtF classes, the instructor needs to rely more on verbal strategies to demonstrate caring and have positive impacts on affective learning. It is likely that the verbal strategies identified in this study could have a very real and important impact on student learning outcomes. Therefore, incorporating these strategies might be a relatively easy way for instructors to create opportunities for positive learning outcomes for students in online courses.

Limitations and Future Research

However, because the study is an early effort at deriving these kinds of immediacy-enhancing methods from students, further research that follows up by refining (and perhaps adding to) the taxonomy is called for, as are attempts to connect the methods to other important outcomes, especially those related more directly to learning. It might be helpful, for example, to discover if the elements that make up the taxonomy are different depending on factors such as the subject matter of online courses, whether the data are collected in a more context-dependent manner (such as through regular reports by online students during the course of a semester), or whether the courses are being taught at the undergraduate level (as most of them were in the present study) or the graduate level. It makes some sense to reason that graduate students would generally have more experience taking online classes, as well as higher overall levels of maturity, both of which could mediate or moderate the need for increased immediacy from online instructors.

Regarding a fuller explanation of why the most chosen strategies were related to more favorable student attitudes and the propensity to take online classes, we have used the concept of enhanced teacher

social presence and teacher caring to make that case (see above). However, future research would be needed to test specifically for the influence of these concepts because we did not measure them in the current study. In the process of developing additional research, careful attention needs to be paid to how such important outcome variables, especially learning, will be measured. If a strictly survey methodology is used, as in the present study, how will learning be validly measured through self-reports? Perhaps a research approach that combines methodologies, such as self-reports along with instructor reports, will be necessary.

Although increased instructor immediacy has clearly been associated with enhanced affective and cognitive learning in classroom environments, the limited research within online environments suggests that further research is certainly needed to determine if enhanced online immediacy (especially that based on student-generated taxonomies) produces increased affective learning, cognitive learning, both kinds of learning, or neither kind of learning.

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Appendix

Communication Survey About Online Instruction

Biographical information about you

_____ Age
_____ Sex (M or F)
_____ Racial/ethnic group (White, African Am., Hispanic, Asian, Native Am., or other)
_____ College classification (freshman, soph, junior, senior, or grad student)
_____Your major
_____Your minor
_____ How many online classes have you taken?
_____ Are you a U.S. citizen? (Y or N)

We are interested in how online instructors use written communication to establish and maintain psychological closeness between themselves and their students. Psychological closeness includes things such as liking, positivity, and accessibility of teachers. In answering the questions below, please focus specifically on written messages such as e-mail and online class contact with your professor.

1. If you are currently in or have previously had an online university class, list (using the blanks provided, one item in each blank) as many **actual** examples as you can of teachers' written words, phrases, emoticons, and/or messages that you believe maintained or increased the sense of psychological closeness with your teacher. (If you have never had an online class, immediately skip to Question 2 on the next page.)

(If you have used up all of the blanks provided, continue your answer on the reverse side of this page).

2. Whether or not you have had an online university class, list (using the blanks provided, one item in each blank) as many **hypothetical** examples as you can of teachers' written words, phrases, emoticons, and/or messages that you believe **would** maintain or increase the sense of psychological closeness with your teacher. Remember that this includes things such as liking, positivity, and accessibility of teachers.

(If you have used up all of the blanks provided, continue your answer on the reverse side of this page).

3. Circle the number that best represents how you feel about online classes in general.

1----------2----------3----------4----------5----------6----------7
Very Neutral Very
negatively positively