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Discouraging Instructional Dissent and Facilitating Students' Learning Experiences Through Instructor Self-Disclosure

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The purpose of this study was to examine if instructors' self-disclosures in the college classroom (i.e., amount, relevance, negativity) influence students' instructional dissent responses (i.e., expressive, rhetorical, vengeful) and learning outcomes (i.e., cognitive learning, affective learning, motivation). In line with research by Ellis (2004), this study attempted to explain these associations by incorporating students' receiver apprehension as a mediating variable. Participants were 206 undergraduate students who completed surveys, and results were examined using two path analyses. Results indicated that students' state receiver apprehension mediated the relationships between instructor self-disclosure with learning outcomes and instructional dissent responses. Specifically, frequent, relevant, but not negative (positive) instructor self-disclosure was related indirectly (mediated by student receiver apprehension) to both student dissent responses and learning outcomes.

The college classroom provides an opportunity for instructors and students to share personal information with one another. For instance, instructors frequently share with their students information about their educational background, professional

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experiences, leisure activities, and information about families, friends, and colleagues (Downs, Javidi, & Nussbaum, 1988; McBride & Wahl, 2005). Students reciprocate classroom disclosures and perceive other students who appropriately self-disclose as competent and likable (Frisby & Sidelinger, 2013). Research indicates that students appreciate their instructors' self-disclosure; students want to get to know their professors on a more personal level (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999).

Although instructors self-disclose about a variety of topics in the classroom, they should be cautious about the types of things they disclose to their students. Most instructors are aware of disclosure boundaries and, as a result, seldom self-disclose information about salary, financial matters, sexual activities, negative personality traits, and credibility-damaging information (McBride & Wahl, 2005). However, some instructors are unaware of the negative impact their disclosures have on the classroom climate and student outcomes; for instance, students perceive instructors as misbehaving when they self-disclose too much and when they stray from the subject (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991). Competent instructors remain cognizant of how they can disclose personal information in the classroom effectively and appropriately (Daly & Vangelisti, 2003). Considering that instructor self-disclosure can serve as a "rich personal source of student-faculty communication" (Fusani, 1994, p. 249), it is important to understand how instructor self-disclosure affects students; specifically, this investigation examined self-disclosure and relationships with receiver apprehension, instructional dissent, and learning outcomes.

Instructor Self-Disclosure

Instructor self-disclosure refers to "teacher statements in the classroom about the self that may or may not be related to the subject content, but reveal information about the teacher that students are unlikely to learn from other sources" (Sorensen, 1989, p. 260). Self-disclosure occurs regularly in higher education classrooms, with some instructors disclosing an average of 10 times per 50-minute lecture (Downs et al., 1988). Instructor self-disclosure can vary by amount, frequency, intent, negativity, depth, honesty, and relevance (Lannutti & Strauman, 2006; Wheelless, 1978). Cayanus and Martin (2008) discovered that three dimensions of self-disclosure are important in the classroom: amount, relevance, and negativity. *Amount* refers to the quantity and frequency of disclosures. *Relevance* is dependent upon whether the disclosure is related to the course content. *Negativity* occurs when instructors disclose bad, immoral, or undesirable information to students. When used appropriately (i.e., relevantly and positively), teacher self-disclosure can lead to beneficial outcomes for students such as affective learning, student interest, student motivation, and perceptions of teacher clarity (Cayanus & Martin, 2008). Self-disclosing positively can also benefit instructors; disclosing positively and early in the semester is related to improved perceptions of teacher credibility (Myers, Brann, & Members of COMM 600, 2009), which could explain why award-winning instructors use self-disclosure more than less successful instructors (Downs et al., 1988).

Additionally, Cayanus and Martin (2004) found that instructor self-disclosure increased the amount of student out-of-class communication with the instructor and stimulated student interest in the course. Instructor self-disclosure also enhances student classroom participation (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994), promotes the development of a supportive classroom climate (Cayanus, Martin, & Myers, 2008) and relates to higher teaching evaluations (Lannutti & Strauman, 2006).

Although instructors and students agree that it is appropriate for an instructor to reveal some personal information, it is inappropriate for instructors to self-disclose their personal problems, personal opinions, prejudices, political leanings, and religious affiliations (Nunziata, 2007). Students also feel that instructor self-disclosures should not be too personal, too positive, too frequent, or too self-promoting (Cayanus, Martin, & Goodboy, 2009; Nunziata, 2007; Sorenson, 1989). Instructors may not always intentionally reveal information to students; students learn about their instructors through Internet profiles, which students believe can enhance the teacher-student relationship but can also lead to speculation about their instructors' honest self-presentation (Diverniero & Hosek, 2011) and decreased perceptions of credibility (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007).

Many instructors are apparently aware of students' potentially negative perceptions and accordingly monitor their disclosures to conceal credibility-damaging information (McBride & Wahl, 2005). However, instructors do not always monitor appropriately, and they still self-disclose information that is irrelevant or negative, which can lead to negative student outcomes—one of which may be student receiver apprehension.

Receiver Apprehension (Mediating Variable)

Receiver apprehension refers to the amount of anxiety a receiver feels when decoding messages and processing information (Preiss, Wheelless, & Allen, 1990). More specifically, receiver apprehension is "the fear of misinterpreting, inadequately processing, and/or not being able to adjust psychologically to messages sent by others" (Wheelless, 1975, p. 263). Receiver apprehension is considered to be both a trait and a state form of anxiety (Ayles, Wilcox, & Ayles, 1995). Trait receiver apprehension is relatively stable across contexts and is viewed as a predisposition to respond to communicative messages with anxiety (Winiecki & Ayles, 1999). State receiver apprehension is described as the degree of anxiety felt about receiving or interpreting information in specific situations or social environments (e.g., classroom; Schumacher & Wheelless, 1997).

Previous research has identified several negative relationships and outcomes associated with receiver apprehension. Not surprisingly, individuals with higher levels of receiver apprehension tend to have higher levels of communication apprehension and typically report a lower willingness to communicate (Bodie & Villaume, 2003; Clark, 1989; Wheelless, 1975). Additionally, individuals who are high in receiver apprehension seem to have a lower level of cognitive complexity (Beatty & Payne, 1981), lower need for cognition (Buhr & Pryor, 1988), and typically perform worse on

listening assessments than individuals who are low in receiver apprehension (Fitch-Hauser, Barker, & Hughes, 1990). Receiver apprehension is also related negatively to trait argumentativeness (Wigley, 1987) and related positively to an external locus of control (Mulanax & Powers, 2001). Receiver apprehension can carry over into digital environments (Wheless, Eddleman-Spears, Magness, & Preiss, 2005) and into professional workplaces (Winiacki & Ayres, 1999), suggesting it can exist in interpersonal, organizational, and mediated contexts. Collectively, research has shown that receiver apprehension is related to several undesirable characteristics and outcomes and can manifest itself in multiple situations, including the college classroom.

Receiver apprehension has been associated negatively with numerous student outcomes likely because of its relationship with ineffective listening and poor information-processing skills (Ellis, 2004; Preiss et al., 1990). Research most pertinent to the college classroom has revealed that receiver apprehension is related negatively with students' cognitive learning (Chesebro, 2003; Hsu, 2012), affective learning (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001), student motivation (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Ellis, 2004), short-term and long-term memory recall (Daniels & Whitman, 1979; Roberts, 1986), and overall grade point average (Schrodt, Wheless, & Ptacek, 2000). Students with high receiver apprehension also tend to be ineffective at note-taking, are easily distracted in the classroom, poorly manage their study time, and have difficulty understanding assignments (Preiss & Gayle, 1999).

Fortunately, students' state receiver apprehension can be reduced by effective teaching behaviors in the classroom (Ellis, 2004). Specifically, students report lower levels of receiver apprehension when their instructors are clear (Chesebro, 2003), confirming (Ellis, 2004; Hsu, 2012), and immediate (Chesebro & McCroskey, 1998, 2001). The link between effective instructional behaviors and receiver apprehension is important, arguably because it mediates the relationship between effective teaching and student learning outcomes. Ellis argued that instructional models involving teacher behaviors and student outcomes should consider the possibility of receiver apprehension as a mediating variable. For example, receiver apprehension mediates the effects between confirmation (Ellis, 2004) and vocal qualities (Hsu, 2012) on students' cognitive and affective learning. Therefore, this study extends the work of Ellis by examining receiver apprehension as an important mediator between instructor behavior (i.e., self-disclosure) and student communication and learning outcomes. One important student communication outcome that deserves attention is instructional dissent.

Instructional Dissent

Goodboy (2011a) proposed that "research should examine both mediating and moderating variables of instructional dissent" (p. 309). This study addresses that call by examining dissent as a function of instructor self-disclosure and receiver apprehension. *Instructional dissent* occurs when "students express their disagreements or complaints about class-related issues" (2011b, p. 423). Instructional dissent can occur in three forms (Goodboy, 2011a). *Rhetorical dissent* refers to students' persuasive

attempts to rectify a class-related issue or problem and is directed toward the instructor. *Expressive dissent* refers to students' "desire to express and vent feelings, feel better by discussing contradictory opinions, and garner sympathy and/or empathy from other individuals" (Goodboy, 2011a, p. 305), which is typically communicated to peers or displaced targets. *Vengeful dissent* involves student attempts to sabotage an instructor's reputation or job status; this type of dissent is generally enacted out of vengeance and to damage the instructor's credibility. Dissent can be triggered by a variety of instructor behaviors including offensiveness, teaching style, and other unfair teaching practices (Goodboy, 2011a, 2011b).

Students' perceptions of the classroom inform if and how they choose to express dissent. For example, students report the decision to withhold rhetorical dissent from their instructors when they lack self-efficacy in dissenting and perceive their instructors to be unapproachable (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2013). Students are also predisposed to using some dissent strategies depending on their sex (Goodboy, 2012), aggressive communication traits (Goodboy & Myers, 2012), and conflict styles (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2013). Combined, these results suggest that students' traits and perceptions of instructor classroom behaviors are related to dissent (Goodboy, 2011b; LaBelle, Martin, & Weber, 2013). Additionally, students blame instructors for their need to dissent (LaBelle & Martin, 2014), and dissent experiences impact students' traditional learning outcomes (Goodboy, 2011b).

Traditional Learning Outcomes

Along with instructional dissent, we were interested in determining if students' learning outcomes were influenced by instructor self-disclosure. Goodboy and Myers (2008) studied motivation, cognitive learning, and affective learning as "traditional learning outcomes" (p. 160) because these variables represented a multifaceted operationalization of student success and learning. This investigation mirrors that rationale and conceptualizes learning outcomes as students' state motivation, cognitive learning, and affective learning. First, *state motivation* refers to student attempts to obtain academic knowledge or skills from classroom activities by finding these activities meaningful (Brophy, 1987). The second learning outcome examined here is *cognitive learning*, which ranges from recall of factual knowledge to metacognitive knowledge, or students' control over their own learning (Anderson et al., 2001). The third learning outcome is *affective learning*, which refers to student feelings and degrees of acceptance toward the subject matter (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964).

Rationale

Instructors' self-disclosure can yield positive student outcomes including affect for the instructor, student motivation, perceptions of teacher clarity, student interest, out-of-class communication, and participation (Cayanus & Martin, 2004, 2008; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994).

Further, instructor self-disclosure can be detrimental to the classroom climate when used inappropriately. Instructors' use of irrelevant and negative disclosure

impacts perceptions of approachability. Ayres and colleagues (1995) explained that students who perceive lower instructor approachability also have higher receiver apprehension. Receiver apprehension is inversely related to affective learning, cognitive learning, and motivation (Chesebro, 2003; Ellis, 2004; Hsu, 2012). Goodboy (2011b) found that students with lower affective learning also reported greater levels of instructional dissent. Collectively, these results suggest that ineffective self-disclosure may give students more anxiety as receivers, which in turn should predict more student dissent. Therefore, the first hypothesis predicts:

H₁: Students' state receiver apprehension will mediate the relationships between instructor self-disclosure (i.e., amount, relevance, negativity) and instructional dissent (i.e., expressive dissent, rhetorical dissent, vengeful dissent).

In previous research, student learning outcomes have been related to both instructor disclosures and student receiver apprehension (Chesebro, 2003; Hsu, 2012; Sorensen, 1989). Additionally, other instructor communication behaviors (e.g., confirmation) affect learning outcomes through receiver apprehension as a mediated path (Ellis, 2004; Hsu, 2012). Here, a path is predicted where instructor self-disclosure is related to the aforementioned traditional learning outcomes through receiver apprehension. This investigation proposes that students will have increased receiver apprehension when instructors self-disclose ineffectively, which in turn will decrease learning outcomes including cognitive learning, affective learning, and motivation as they will have more difficulty processing course content. When instructors use effective self-disclosure, students' receiver apprehension should decrease, thus improving learning outcomes because students can accurately and clearly interpret important information in class. Therefore, the second hypothesis predicts:

H₂: Students' state receiver apprehension will mediate the relationships between instructor self-disclosure (i.e., amount, relevance, negativity) and student learning outcomes (i.e., state motivation, cognitive learning, affective learning).

Method

Participants

The participants sampled in this study were 206 undergraduate students (89 men, 113 women, 4 sex unreported) who were enrolled in one of two large lecture introductory communication studies courses at a midsized northeastern university. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 46 years old ($M = 20.18$, $SD = 2.66$). Participants reported on 123 male instructors and 83 female instructors. The class sizes reported on were distributed across 30 students or less ($n = 52$), 31–100 students ($n = 51$), 101–200 students ($n = 70$), and 200+ students ($n = 33$). A majority of participants ($n = 184$) had not taken a class before with the instructor on which they reported, and approximately half of the students ($n = 108$) reported on a class outside of their major requirements.

Procedures and Measurement

After obtaining institutional review board approval and toward the end of the semester, participants completed a survey in reference to the class they attended prior to the data collection to provide variability in classes and instructors (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986). Participants completed a questionnaire including the following measures: the Teacher Self-Disclosure Scale (Cayanus & Martin, 2008), State-Receiver Apprehension Test (SRAT; Schumacher & Wheelless, 1997), Instructional Dissent Scale (IDS; Goodboy, 2011b), Revised Cognitive Learning Indicators Scale (Frymier & Houser, 1999), the Affective Learning Scale (McCroskey, Richmond, Plax, & Kearney, 1985), and the Student Motivation Scale (Richmond, 1990). Means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas for all measures are reported in Table 1.

The *Teacher Self-Disclosure Scale* is 14 items and measures the amount (four items), relevance (five items), and negativity (five items) of instructor disclosures in the classroom using three subscales. Responses are solicited using a 7-point Likert response format ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Sample items include "My instructor often shares his/her dislikes" (amount), "My instructor provides personal explanations that make the content relevant" (relevance), and "My instructor discloses negative things about him/herself" (negativity). Previous reliability coefficients for the subscales have ranged from .77 to .88 (Cayanus & Martin, 2008; Cayanus et al., 2009).

The IDS is a 22-item instrument that asks participants to report on how often they express their disagreements or complaints about class-related issues. This measure is comprised of three subscales that operationalize expressive dissent (10 items), rhetorical dissent (six items), and vengeful dissent (six items). Responses are solicited using a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Sample items include "I complain to others to express my frustration with this course" (expressive), "I voice my opinions to my teacher when there is a disagreement because I want to do better in the course" (rhetorical), and "I hope to ruin my teacher's reputation by exposing his/her bad practices to others" (vengeful). Previous reliability coefficients for the IDS subscales have ranged from .87 to .96 (Goodboy, 2012; LaBelle et al., 2013).

The SRAT consists of 13 items that measure state receiver anxiety during a conversation. This scale has been adapted successfully to operationalize student receiver apprehension experienced with a target instructor (e.g., Ellis, 2004; Hsu, 2012). Responses were solicited on a 5-point Likert response format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include "I was sometimes afraid that I would not completely understand what was being said by my instructor" and "I sometimes felt uncomfortable when listening to my instructor's ideas." Previous reliability coefficients have been .90 (Ellis, 2004) and .92 (Hsu, 2012).

The *Revised Cognitive Learning Indicators Scale* consists of seven items and measures participants' behaviors or activities associated with cognitive learning. Responses were solicited on a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from 0

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability Coefficients, and Correlations for Variables

Variables	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Student Receiver	31.79	8.90	.87	—									
Apprehension													
<i>Instructor Self-Disclosure</i>													
2. Amount	17.13	5.56	.87	-.27***	—								
3. Relevance	24.18	7.30	.93	-.33***	.63***	—							
4. Negativity	12.44	6.89	.90	.28***	.24***	.03	—						
<i>Learning Outcomes</i>													
5. State Motivation	23.05	6.38	.84	-.45***	.21**	.27***	-.24**	—					
6. Cognitive Learning	16.04	5.51	.84	-.24**	.22**	.19*	-.11	.42***	—				
7. Affective Learning	64.42	14.22	.94	-.64***	.23**	.38***	-.23**	.60***	.29***	—			
<i>Instructional Dissent</i>													
8. Expressive	14.06	10.65	.96	.65***	-.18**	-.22**	.15*	-.30***	.10	-.50***	—		
9. Rhetorical	7.20	5.97	.92	.19**	.06	-.04	.09	-.03	.25***	-.12	.50***	—	
10. Vengeful	2.41	4.52	.91	.44***	-.07	-.16*	.25***	-.28***	.07	-.39***	.55***	.57***	—

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

(*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Sample items include “I feel that I have learned a lot in the class” and “I explain course content to other students.” Previous reliability coefficients have been .88 (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009) and .83 (Frymier, 2005).

The Affective Learning Scale is 12 items and measures student affect for the course content, course instructor, and behaviors recommended in the course. Responses were solicited using a 7-point semantic differential response format. Sample items include “my feelings about the course instructor are: good/bad, positive/negative.” Previous reliability coefficients have been .95 (Goodboy & Myers, 2008; Hsu, 2012).

The Student Motivation Scale is five items and measures students’ state motivation toward a specific course and instructor. Responses were solicited using a 7-point semantic differential response format. Sample items include “my feelings toward taking the course are: motivated/unmotivated, interested/uninterested, etc.” Previous reliability coefficients have been .94 (Richmond, 1990) and .92 (Myers & Zhong, 2004).

Results

Prior to testing the hypotheses, a correlation matrix was computed between all measured variables (see Table 1).

Hypothesis 1 predicted that students’ receiver apprehension would mediate the relationships between instructor self-disclosure (i.e., amount, relevance, negativity) and instructional dissent responses (i.e., expressive dissent, rhetorical dissent, vengeful dissent). To test this hypothesis, a path analysis was computed using LISREL 8.8 and the model was estimated with maximum likelihood estimation (ML). According to the fit statistics recommended by Kline (2011), model fit was assessed using the minimum fit function chi-square, Bentler comparative fit index (CFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and Steiger-Lind root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Based on previous research (e.g., Goodboy, 2011b), the three types of instructional dissent were allowed to correlate in the model. The data provided a good fit for the model, $\chi^2 = 11.54$, $df = 9$, $p = .24$; CFI = .99; GFI = .98; SRMR = .03; RMSEA = .04. Therefore, hypothesis 1 received

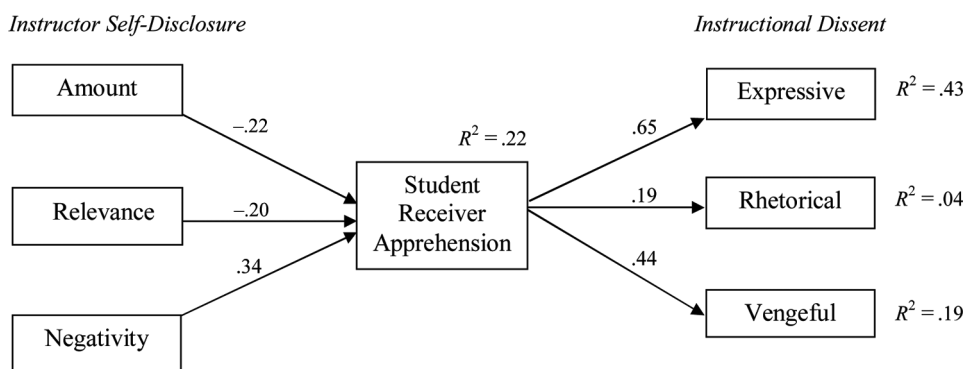


Figure 1 Path analysis predicting instructional dissent. Fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 11.56$, $df = 9$, $p = .24$; CFI = .99; GFI = .98; SRMR = .03; RMSEA = .04. All paths are significant and displayed with standardized values.

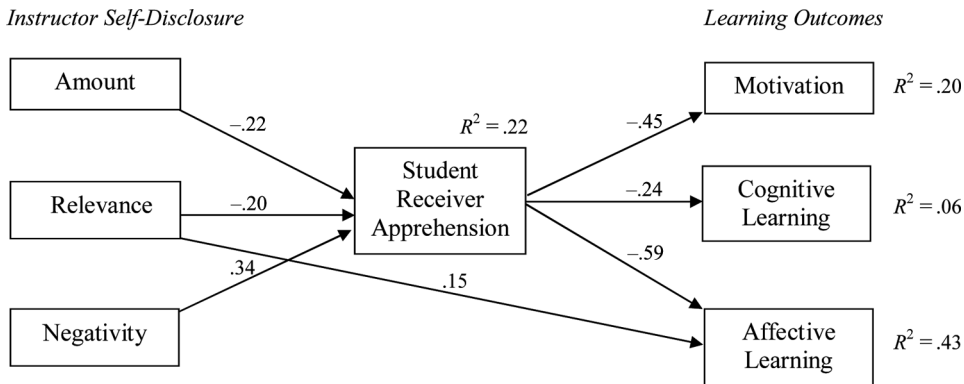


Figure 2 Path analysis predicting learning outcomes. Fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 16.56$, $df = 8$, $p = .04$; CFI = .98; GFI = .98; SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .07. All paths are significant and displayed with standardized values.

support and the model including significant paths with standardized values is reported in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that students' receiver apprehension would mediate the relationships between instructor self-disclosure (i.e., amount, relevance, negativity) and learning outcomes (i.e., state motivation, cognitive learning, affective learning). To test this hypothesis, another path analysis was computed using ML estimation. Because these learning outcomes are all correlated in previous research (e.g., Goodboy & Myers, 2008), they were allowed to correlate in the model. The proposed model produced fit statistics that indicated the data fit the model reasonably well, $\chi^2 = 24.85$, $df = 9$, $p < .01$; CFI = .97; GFI = .97; SRMR = .06; RMSEA = .09. However, the standardized residuals and modification indices were inspected to determine if model fit could be improved. The data suggested an improved model by adding a direct path between the relevance dimension of instructor self-disclosure and affective learning. After inserting this path, a second path analysis was conducted. Results indicated that the data fit the proposed model reasonably well, $\chi^2 = 16.56$, $df = 8$, $p = .04$; CFI = .98; GFI = .98; SRMR = .05; RMSEA = .07. To test the improvement of the model, a chi-square difference test revealed that the improvement in fit was significant, $\chi^2_D(1) = 8.29$, $p < .01$. Therefore, hypothesis 2 received support and the improved model including significant paths with standardized values is reported in Figure 2.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine if instructors' self-disclosure in the college classroom influenced students' learning outcomes and instructional dissent responses by reducing students' state receiver apprehension. Two sets of findings emerged from separate path analyses. The first path analysis revealed that the relationships between instructor self-disclosure (i.e., amount, relevance, negativity) and instructional dissent (i.e., expressive, rhetorical, vengeful) were mediated by student receiver

apprehension. The second path analysis indicated that the relationships between instructor self-disclosure (i.e., amount, relevance, negativity) and student learning outcomes (i.e., motivation, cognitive learning, affective learning) were also mediated by student receiver apprehension. Additionally, a direct and positive effect was discovered between the relevance dimension of instructor self-disclosure and student affective learning.

The collective results and interpretations for both path models are straightforward. These results suggest that putting students at ease and allowing them to be comfortable in receiving information presented in class (i.e., reducing student receiver apprehension) can be accomplished when instructors self-disclose in class frequently but keep their disclosures positive in valence and relate their disclosures to the subject matter.

The results of this study suggest that when instructor self-disclosure is communicated appropriately and student receiver apprehension is minimized, students complain less about the course and instructor and report learning more in the class. Consistent with propositions generated by rhetorical/relational goals theory (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006), it is likely that instructor self-disclosure meets students' relational needs in class by developing a more interpersonal relationship with their instructor through mutual sharing of personal information. Such a relationship would create a more comfortable learning environment for students and would help to explain why they experience less receiver apprehension in class. Additionally, when an instructor self-discloses appropriately, it may suggest to students that the instructor is personable, easy-going, and approachable, which, in turn, would help them feel at ease while receiving course information and give them less to complain about because they feel comfortable with the course content.

Another explanation for these results is rooted in the rhetorical perspective of instruction (Mottet et al., 2006). Beatty and Payne (1981) found a negative relationship existed between receiver apprehension and cognitive complexity, suggesting that individuals with high receiver apprehension prefer information that is straightforward and easy to interpret. Similarly, Aylor (2003) found that individuals who were low in cognitive complexity preferred instructors with narrative skills, arguably because stories and personal examples serve as an alternative teaching method that can reinforce course content through the use of simplified examples. Similar to narrative skills, it is reasonable to assume that relevant and appropriate self-disclosure allows an instructor to deliver information in a less intimidating and more relatable manner (Aylor, 2003). When receiving course content in this fashion, students with high receiver apprehension, who are generally less cognitively complex, are able to better understand and process the information, which in turn leads to greater learning outcomes and less instructional dissent. Thus, self-disclosure in this sense may be viewed as a rhetorical behavior, as it decreases students' receiver apprehension allowing them to effectively interpret reinforced course content.

Interestingly, the path between instructor relevant self-disclosure and affective learning was a direct relationship and did not require students' receiver apprehension as mediator, unlike the other self-disclosure dimensions for both models. Relevant

self-disclosure, which is tied directly to the subject matter, appears to foster student affect despite the level of student receiver apprehension. Indeed, this may be the case because students find relevant instruction to be motivating (Frymier & Shulman, 1995) and intellectually stimulating (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2011). Much like the use of instructor humor, which must be relevant for students to learn (Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010), instructor self-disclosure should be strategically presented as relevant to the class. Muddiman and Frymier (2009) found that students report relevance in the classroom when “instructors tell students personal stories or examples from their lives and/or career” (p. 143). Moreover, Keller (1987) proposed some useful strategies to make content more relevant such as matching students’ needs to the lecture and relating to students’ experiences. Relevant self-disclosure, then, is one way in which instructors can relate to students’ experiences by linking personal information to their lives.

As in any study, the current study had several limitations. First, this study employed survey data and did not examine the causal effects of instructor’s self-disclosure. Second, this study only examined student receiver apprehension as a mediator. It is possible that the positive effects of instructor self-disclosure are mediated by other variables (e.g., perceived understanding, affinity, etc.). Third, this study did not measure some of the other dimensions of instructor self-disclosure such as honesty and intentionality (Lannutti & Strauman, 2006) that have been linked to student outcomes.

Given these limitations, there are several future directions that should be considered. First, live lecture experimental studies that manipulate different dimensions of instructor self-disclosure are warranted to establish causality and preserve ecological validity. Second, experimental research and live lecture studies should measure state instead of trait receiver apprehension. Third, research should more closely examine the role that students’ self-disclosures in the college classroom play in fostering learning and dissent responses (Frisby & Sidelinger, 2013). It is possible that relevant student disclosures in class, which can serve as participation, may help clarify or reinforce taught concepts to the collective class. Fourth, it is clear by now that instructional dissent is influenced by (a) effective/ineffective teaching behaviors, (b) students’ traits, attributions, and beliefs about learning, and (c) student affect and motivational variables. At this stage, it may be advantageous for instructional communication researchers to provide a more comprehensive model of instructional dissent, rather than relying on variable-analytic studies to examine these ideas in isolation. A more comprehensive picture of antecedents and consequences of instructional dissent may be of value to instructors who desire to keep student complaints to a minimum.

Conclusion

Instructors have a balancing act to perform any time they consider incorporating self-disclosure in their lecture; that is, instructors must consider how frequently they self-disclose and attempt to tie any self-disclosure to the content being taught, while concurrently making sure that the valence of disclosures is positive. Although intuitively this may seem like obvious advice, research suggests that instructors commonly

misuse self-disclosure as a teaching strategy. Instructors frequently divert from important content and occasionally disclose information that students consider inappropriate and distracting (Kearney et al., 1991). The results of this study suggest that when instructors are mindful of what they disclose in class, students feel less anxious in receiving the lecture content and more comfortable interacting with them. When receiver apprehension is low, students report learning more and dissenting less. Therefore, instructors should keep their disclosure positive and relevant to optimize student learning and discourage student confrontations.

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