Translating Research into Instructional Practice:

Instructor Credibility

Jason J. Teven, California State University, Fullerton

More than 2500 years ago, Aristotle espoused that the source of a message contributes to the persuasiveness of that message. Credibility is the image of the source in the minds of receivers (Andersen & Clevenger, 1963) and is particularly important in the instructional communication context. In the classroom, the instructor is a central figure and the primary source of messages and information. If students do not place trust in their instructors, they may not make the investment in the relationship or in the learning process, and may even question the information instructors are attempting to present. From the initial meeting between the students and the instructor until the particular course ends, it is important for instructors to both establish and maintain the perception of credibility.

Instructor Credibility

Over the years, several studies have attempted to isolate dimensions in determining source credibility (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; McCroskey, Holdridge, & Toomb, 1974; McCroskey & Young, 1981). Based upon contemporary social scientific research, instructor source credibility is considered to be a perception that students have of their instructors based on the observed communication behaviors of the instructor (Teven, 2007) and consists of three dimensions: competence, trustworthiness,
and goodwill (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Competence consists of possessing knowledge or expertise of a particular subject. Competent instructors explain complex material well, have good classroom management skills, have the ability to answer student questions, and communicate effectively. Trustworthiness, or character, is the degree to which students trust their instructors. Trustworthy instructors offer rational explanations for grading, treat students fairly, give immediate feedback, and never embarrass students or are verbally abusive towards students. Goodwill, or caring, is the extent to which students perceive their instructors as caring for them and having their best interests at heart. James McCroskey (1992) noted that caring instructors have the ability to be empathic (i.e., the ability to identify with another person’s situation or feelings), understanding (i.e., the ability to comprehend another person’s ideas, feelings, and needs), and responsive (i.e., being other-oriented and having sensitivity toward others).

Generally, an instructor who relates well with students is more likely to be perceived as a credible source. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Amber Finn and her colleagues (2009) explored the relationships among instructor credibility, instructor behaviors and traits, and student outcomes in over 50 independent studies. They concluded that while instructor credibility plays a substantial role in both creating effective instructor-student interpersonal relationships and enhancing student learning, it is perhaps the caring dimension that is the most salient dimension (of the three
dimensions) of instructor credibility to students. In the college classroom, instructors show their caring for their students in five ways: (1) they behave in ways that demonstrate their concern for student performance and/or grades; (2) they are concerned about their own teaching and classroom performance; (3) they solicit, and respond to, student questions and feedback; (4) they attempt to build positive interpersonal relationships with their students; and (5) they use nonverbal immediacy behaviors (Teven & Gorham, 1988).

Based on the instructional communication research conducted to date, five general conclusions can be drawn about the role that instructor credibility plays in the classroom:

- First, perceived instructor credibility is associated positively with instructor evaluations, student affective learning, and student cognitive learning (Teven & McCroskey, 1997). Simply put, students report greater motivation to learn, enhanced affect, and increased cognitive learning when they perceive their instructors as credible (Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007; Frymier & Thompson, 1992; McCroskey, Valencic, & Richmond, 2004; Schrodt, Witt, Turman, Myers, Barton, & Jernberg, 2009; Teven, 2001). Once an instructor is perceived as credible, students are more motivated to learn the course content, retain more of the content, have greater recall of information on exams, and ultimately have more respect for the instructor.
Second, credible instructors often are perceived by students as more caring. Instructors, however, must be able to communicate to their students that they do care about them in order for students to perceive them as caring. As aptly stated by Jason Teven and James McCroskey (1997), “it is not the caring that counts; it is the perception of caring that is critical” (p. 1). Instructors who are nonverbally immediate and use more explicit, verbally caring messages with their students have been found to generate positive student perceptions of instructor competence and trustworthiness (Teven & Hanson, 2004).

Third, for instructors to be perceived as credible by their students, instructors should strive to establish and maintain each dimension—competence, trustworthiness, and goodwill. It is not enough for an instructor to only be perceived as competent, but not trustworthy, or perceived as caring but not competent. The optimum condition is for you to be perceived credible by your students on all three dimensions.

Fourth, credible instructors are immediate instructors. Communication behaviors that have been known to increase immediacy include eye contact, gestures, relaxed body position, smiling, vocal expressiveness, movement, and proximity (Anderson, 1979). Studies that have focused on the relationship between instructor credibility and nonverbal immediacy (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998; Teven & Hanson, 2004) reveal that the nonverbal immediacy behaviors of
instructors are likely cuing students’ perceptions of instructor goodwill and caring.

- Fifth, students who perceive their instructors as more credible are more likely to communicate with instructors outside of class (Myers, 2004). Students are generally more motivated to engage in out-of-class communication as a function of their instructor’s in-class communication, particularly if students perceive the instructor as credible, responsive, immediate, and inviting (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Nadler & Nadler, 1999, 2001; Wrench & Punyanunt, 2004). Students often will seek their instructors outside of the classroom in other vital roles such as mentors, academic advisors, and student club advisors. Clearly, instructor credibility extends beyond the confines of the traditional classroom.

**Tips for Establishing Credibility in the Classroom**

1. Recognize the importance and power of first impressions. From the minute you walk into your classroom on the first day of class, remember that the students are curious about you and the course. The first few minutes of class time are crucial as it is important to make a good (i.e., professional) impression. Students are looking closely at how you dress, walk, gesture, talk, and present yourself. These characteristics all act as clues as to your personality and credibility. Students also can have a great deal of uncertainty about the nature of the course or uncertainty about you as the instructor. The first day is an opportunity for you to let students know that you are a
knowledgeable, trustworthy, and caring source.

2. Be strategic in the verbal and nonverbal messages you send your students in class. The types of influence messages that you employ either can enhance or decrease your students’ perceptions of your credibility (Teven & Herring, 2005). Student satisfaction also is positively and significantly related to both perceived instructor referent power and expert power, so you might consider developing these two bases of influence in order to bolster your credibility with your students.

3. You must continually protect your perceived credibility. One way to do this is to avoid misbehaving because instructors who engage in inappropriate behaviors (or misbehaviors) are perceived as less credible than instructors who display appropriate classroom behaviors (Teven, 2007). Some examples of instructor misbehaviors are arriving at class late; being unprepared or disorganized; speaking in a sarcastic tone; being verbally abusive towards or using putdowns with students; showing favoritism; or acting generally negatively with students (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991). Instructors who use verbal aggressiveness in the classroom also tend to decrease students’ perceptions of instructor competence, character, and caring (Myers, 2001; Teven, 2001). To preserve your own credibility with students, avoid misbehaving.

4. Use immediacy to establish and maintain your credibility with students. Nonverbal immediacy is a means for instructors to build rapport and trust with students. Instructional communication research clearly demonstrates that instructors who are
more immediate are perceived as more credible than instructors who are less immediate (Teven, 2001, 2007; Teven & Hanson, 2004; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1998).

5. Consider that credibility extends beyond your classroom interactions with students. Perceived instructor credibility is influenced by a host of variables that are not related to classroom teaching behaviors. For instance, an instructor’s office appearance can influence students’ perceptions of instructor credibility. In an experimental study, students who visited an untidy and non-aesthetically pleasing office perceived the instructor as less authoritative, less trustworthy, and less friendly whereas students who visited a clean and nicely arranged office rated that instructor as more credible (Teven & Comadena, 1996). As an instructor, you have some ability to personalize your office. It is a good idea to encourage your students to visit you in your office, but make sure to keep it neat, organized, and attractive to make a positive impression and enhance your credibility.

Conclusion

Aristotle correctly observed long ago that who the communicator is can have a tremendous influence on the persuadibility of an audience. Instructor credibility is one of the most important factors in being an effective classroom instructor.

References


communication to instructor immediacy and trust and to student motivation.  

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