



Effective Instructional Practice:

Avoiding Verbal Aggressiveness

Carrie D. Kennedy-Lightsey, Stephen F. Austin State University

Communication behavior is considered verbally aggressive when an individual applies symbolic force to dominate, damage, defeat, or destroy another person's self-concept with the intention to hurt that person (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Verbally aggressive individuals aim to win arguments by attacking their opponents with messages that contain swearing, teasing, threats, name-calling, put-downs, and attacks on their character, competence, physical appearance, or background (Infante & Wigley, 1986). In the classroom, verbally aggressive messages may also contain negative nonverbal behaviors (e.g., dirty looks, throwing chalk) and negative comments about students' work ethic (e.g., calling students lazy or irresponsible) (Myers, Brann, & Martin, 2013).

Avoiding verbally aggressive behavior in the classroom is important for three primary reasons. First, verbal aggressiveness creates a defensive learning environment, causes psychological pain, and distracts students from focusing on all sides of an issue. Even if used infrequently, verbal aggressiveness is most memorable because it violates students' expectations (Myers & Rocca, 2001). In fact, the negative affective states of verbal aggressiveness can be more damaging than physical aggressiveness (Infante, 1995). Students are more likely to enact negative disruptive behaviors when trying to convince you to submit to their requests when they are verbally aggressive (Kennedy-Lightsey & Myers, 2009) or when they perceive you as verbally aggressive (Claus, Chory, & Malachowski, 2012). Moreover, verbally aggressive students are more likely to

perceive their teachers as ideologically biased (Linville & Mazer, 2013) and vengefully ruin an instructor's reputation as a means for expressing class-related disagreements or complaints (Goodboy & Myers, 2012). The reciprocal nature of verbal aggressiveness offers a plausible explanation for why verbally aggressive K-12 teachers also report teacher burnout (Avtgis & Rancer, 2008).

Second, students perceive verbally aggressive instructors less favorably. Specifically, they are perceived as less friendly, relaxed, attentive, animated, and impression leaving (Myers & Rocca, 2000). Verbally aggressive instructors are considered unfair (Claus et al., 2012); less competent, trustworthy, and caring (Edwards & Myers, 2007); and less socially, physically, and task attractive (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999). Thus, students are less motivated to communicate with their verbally aggressive instructors for relational, functional, and participatory reasons, but more so for excuse-making reasons (Myers, Edwards, Wahl, & Martin, 2007). Third, students do not academically perform as well in courses taught by verbally aggressive instructors. These students report less state motivation, less cognitive learning, less affect for the course content, less class participation, and diminished course attendance (Myers, 2002; Myers & Rocca, 2001; Rocca, 2008).

Five Tips for Avoiding Verbal Aggressiveness in the Classroom

1. When discussing controversial issues, focus on the issue and avoid behaviors that can damage your students' sense of self. Refrain from using statements that place blame or judgment (e.g., "You're an idiot," "Your response is stupid"). Similarly, be careful when using humor and sarcasm. Avoid making an individual or a group of students the subject of your humorous or sarcastic messages. Instead, place yourself

as the subject of the message, choose messages that do not involve any particular person or group, or avoid these message types all together.

2. Even if you are not attacking your students personally, they may mistake disagreement about controversial issues as verbal aggressiveness and become defensive in response (Schrodt & Finn, 2010). This mistake is particularly applicable to verbally aggressive students. Resist the urge to reciprocate their behavior. Instead, practice nonverbally immediate behaviors (Mazer & Stowe, 2016) and inform students that verbally aggressive messages are not justified, even if they believe otherwise.

3. Prepare for situations that may contribute to student anger, which can result in students becoming verbally aggressive with you (Infante, 1995). For instance, graded assignments can threaten students' face, or image, which may spark anger and destructive communication (Claus et al., 2012). Consider instituting policies that ask students to wait 24 hours before discussing a grade. Encourage students to review the assignment and your feedback during this time. Although verbally aggressive students may perceive your feedback as less useful (Malachowski, Martin, & Vallade, 2013), they should be better able to manage their emotions about the graded work once some time has passed.

4. Remind students that listening to and understanding a classmate's beliefs, attitudes, values, and opinions does not mean they have to agree with the classmate. Develop questions that keep students focused on understanding the issue (e.g., "What is the problem and what causes it?") before asking questions that encourage students to formulate and communicate their opinion (e.g., "What is the best solution and how does it address the problem?") (Infante, 1995; Schrodt & Finn, 2010).

5. Given that you are more likely to aggress when you are angry, it is important for you to recognize your frustration and withhold verbally aggressive responses. If this is difficult for you, arrange a different time to discuss the issue at hand. This will allow you to calm your emotions and reflect on the reasons and evidence supporting your stance. If it is not important to continue the conversation, cease discussion and find an alternative way (e.g., exercising, mediating) to release your frustration.

Assessing Your Verbal Aggressiveness

To assess your verbal aggressiveness, complete the 20-item Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986; also available in Rubin, 1994) or the 10-item Verbal Aggressiveness Scale short-form (Beatty, Rudd, & Valencic, 1999).

References

- Avtgis, T. A., & Rancer, A. S. (2008). The relationship between trait verbal aggressiveness and teacher burnout in K-12 teachers. *Communication Research Reports, 25*, 86-89. doi:10.1080/08824090701831875
- Beatty, M. J., Rudd, J. E., & Valencic, K. M. (1999). A re-examination of the verbal aggressiveness scale: One factor or two? *Communication Research Reports, 16*, 10-17. doi:10.1080/08824099909388696
- Claus, C. J., Chory, R. M., & Malachowski, C. C. (2012). Student antisocial compliance-gaining as a function of instructor aggressive communication and classroom justice. *Communication Education, 61*, 17-43. doi:10.1080/03634523.2011.619270
- Edwards, C., & Myers, S. A. (2007). Perceived instructor credibility as a function of instructor aggressive communication. *Communication Research Reports, 24*,

47-53. doi:10.1080/08824090601128141

Finn, A. N., & Ledbetter, A. M. (2014). Teacher verbal aggressiveness and credibility mediate the relationship between teacher technology policies and perceived student learning. *Communication Education, 63*, 210-234.

doi:10.1080/03634523.2014.919009

Goodboy, A. K., & Myers, S. A. (2012). Instructional dissent as an expression of students' verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness traits. *Communication Education, 61*, 448-458. doi:10.1080/03634523.2012.699635

Infante, D. A. (1995). Teaching students to understand and control verbal aggression. *Communication Education, 44*, 51-63. doi:10.1080/03634529509378997

Infante, D. A., & Wigley, C. J., III. (1986). Verbal aggressiveness: An interpersonal model and measure. *Communication Monographs, 53*, 61-69.

doi:10.1080/03637758609376126

Kennedy-Lightsey, C. D., & Myers, S. A. (2009). College students' use of behavioral alteration techniques as a function of aggressive communication. *Communication Education, 58*, 54-73. doi:10.1080/03634520802272299

Linville, D. L., & Mazer, J. P. (2013). The role of student aggressive communication traits in the perception of instructor ideological bias in the classroom. *Communication Education, 62*, 48-60. doi:10.1080/03634523.2012.721889

Mazer, J. P., & Stowe, S. A. (2016). Can teacher immediacy reduce the impact of verbal aggressiveness? Examining effects on student outcomes and perceptions of teacher credibility. *Western Journal of Communication, 80*, 21-37.

doi:10.1080/10570314.2014.943421

- Malachowski, C. C., Martin, M. M., & Vallade, J. I. (2013). An examination of students' adaptation, aggression, and apprehension traits with their instructional feedback orientations. *Communication Education, 62*, 127-147.
doi:10.1080/03634523.2012.748208
- Myers, S. A., Brann, M., & Martin, M. M. (2013). Identifying the content and topics of instructor use of verbally aggressive messages. *Communication Research Reports, 30*, 252-258. doi:10.1080/08824096.2013.806260
- Myers, S. A., Edwards, C., Wahl, S. T., & Martin, M. M. (2007). The relationship between perceived instructor aggressive communication and college student involvement. *Communication Education, 56*, 495-508.
doi:10.1080/03634520701466398
- Myers, S. A., & Rocca, K. A. (2000). The relationship between perceived instructor communicator style, argumentativeness, and verbal aggressiveness. *Communication Research Reports, 17*, 1-12. doi:10.1080/08824090009388745
- Myers, S. A., & Rocca, K. A. (2001). Perceived instructor argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness in the college classroom: Effects on student perceptions of climate, apprehension, and state motivation. *Western Journal of Communication, 65*, 113-137. doi:10.1080/10570310109374696
- Rocca, K. A. (2008). Participation in the college classroom: The impact of instructor immediacy and verbal aggression. *Journal of Classroom Interaction, 43*(2), 22-33.
- Rocca, K. A., & McCroskey, J. C. (1999). The interrelationship of student ratings of instructors' immediacy, verbal aggressiveness, homophily, and interpersonal

attraction. *Communication Education*, 48, 308-316.

doi:10.1080/03634529909379181

Rubin, R. B. (1994). Verbal aggressiveness scale. In R. B. Rubin, P. Palmgreen, & H. E. Sypher (Eds.), *Communication research measures: A sourcebook* (pp. 387-392). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Schrodt, P., & Finn, A. N. (2010). Reconsidering the role of aggressive communication in higher education. In T. A. Avtgis & A. S. Rancer (Eds.), *Arguments, aggression, and conflict: New directions in theory and research* (pp. 159-176). New York, NY: Routledge.