



## Effective Instructional Practice:

### Considering Students' Motives for Communicating with Instructors

Matthew M. Martin, West Virginia University

“Why do people communicate with others” is a question that has been explored by communication scholars for many years. In 1988, Rubin, Perse, and Barbato investigated why people talk to others in general and identified six motives: affection, pleasure, inclusion, escape, control, and relaxation. Martin, Myers, and Mottet (1999) asked a similar question about students in the classroom context (i.e., why do students communicate with their instructors?) and identified five motives: relational, functional, participation, excuse-making, and sycophancy. Students communicate for the *relational* motive when they talk to their instructors to develop an interpersonal relationship. The *functional* motive entails communicating to learn more about the course material or assignments. The *participation* motive involves demonstrating that one is interested and engaged with the course. Students communicate for the *excuse-making* motive when they explain why they have been lacking in their course attendance or performance. The *sycophancy* motive includes communicating with the instructor to be viewed favorably and to potentially earn special considerations.

Considering students' motives for communicating with their instructors is important for three reasons. First, students' motives are related to how students communicate in the classroom. Students who communicate for the functional motive are likely to use overt questions in the classroom, whereas students who communicate for the relational and participation motives are more likely to seek information through observing and indirect means (Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002b). Students who

communicate for the functional motive are less likely to engage in vengeful dissent about their instructors while students who communicate more overall in the classroom are more likely to use rhetorical dissent with their instructors (Goodboy & Martin, 2014). Second, students' motives for communicating with their instructors is related to their classroom learning. Martin, Mottet, and Myers (2002) found that students who communicate more for the relational, functional, and participation motives reported greater cognitive learning and affective learning toward their instructors. Third, because individuals' motives for communicating influences their goals, plans, and behaviors (Rubin & Martin, 1998), students' motives can help explain why they behave the way they do, as well as predict how they are likely to behave in a given situation.

#### **Five Tips Involving Students' Motives for Communicating with Instructors**

1. As an instructor, how you communicate is going to have an impact on how your students communicate in the classroom. Using approach strategies (e.g., recognizing students personally, practicing inclusiveness, being complimentary) will lead to students communicating more for the relational and participation motives (Mottet, Martin, & Myers, 2004). When students perceive you as interpersonally competent and being supportive, they will increase their classroom participation and question-asking (Myers & Claus, 2012).

2. If you are perceived as offensive and indolent, students will be less likely to communicate for the functional motive while if you are perceived as incompetent, students will be less likely to communicate for the relational, participation, and sycophant motives (Goodboy, Myers, & Bolkan, 2010). If you regularly self-disclose negative information about yourself in class, students will be less likely to communicate

in class overall (Cayanus, Martin, & Goodboy, 2009).

3. When students have a negative view of the classroom climate (Myers & Claus, 2012) or when students do not believe they are part of the class, e.g., they feel like they are outsiders in the class, students will be less likely to communicate (Myers, 2006). To get students to communicate more for the motives of relational, functional, and participation, you need to create a positive classroom environment where no students feel excluded.

4. Remember that students have motives for communicating with their instructors beyond the five listed above (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 2002). In a study of communication between students and their advisors, Leach and Wang (2015) identified an additional motive: *encouragement*. It is possible, maybe even likely, that millennial students who are often classified as more entitled, parented, and grade oriented possess additional motives for communicating with their instructors, e.g., career advancement/networking (Goldman & Martin, 2014).

5. Does it seem to you that the only reason students talk to you is to make excuses? How does that make you feel about teaching/your job? Knapp (2010) argued that instructors' perceptions of why students are communicating with them in their classes (i.e., students' motives) are related to instructors' classroom behaviors and their feelings about their teaching positions. If your students are not communicating that often with you for relational, functional, and participation motives and you want those types of communication to increase, you can change your communication behaviors and classroom environment to increase students' positive communication in the classroom.

### **Assessing Students' Motives for Communicating with their Instructors**

Students can assess their motives using the Student Motives to Communicate Scale (Rubin, Rubin, Graham, Perse, & Seibold, 2009).

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