

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 063 737

EM 009 897

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TITLE Instructional Metacommunication and Self-Directed Learning.
INSTITUTION Wright State Univ., Dayton, Ohio.
PUB DATE Apr 72
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the International Communication Association Annual Convention (Atlanta, Georgia, April 19-22, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Feedback; Learning Motivation; Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Behavior; Teacher Education; *Teacher Evaluation; *Teaching Methods; *Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS *Instructional Metacommunication

ABSTRACT

Greater student satisfaction, trust, and self-directed learning may result if the teacher uses questioning, clarifying and accepting behaviors for both student feedback about the effectiveness of the teacher's communication behavior (instructional metacommunication) and about the content presented; instructional metacommunication will enable teachers to improve their communication delivery skills and more adequately ascertain the specific needs, interests, and different knowledge and ability levels of their students. As an exploratory investigation of these hypotheses and also to explore the feasibility of instructional metacommunication, instructors in a team-taught graduate course in self-directed learning had students develop behavioral objectives for improved interpersonal communication, and elicited feedback about the effectiveness of their communication behavior after lecture-discussions. Student metacommunicative feedback was less threatening and more useful than anticipated. Seminars or workshops designed to provide experience and training for teachers in instructional metacommunication are suggested. (Author/SN)

ED 063737

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INSTRUCTIONAL METACOMMUNICATION AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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International Communication Association
Atlanta, Georgia
April 19-22, 1972

EM009897

The purpose of this paper is to describe an exploratory study concerning instructional metacommunication and self-directed learning being conducted at Wright State University. In recent years increasing attention has been given to self-directed student learning (Combs, 1962; Farber and Wilson, 1963; Leonard, 1968; Rogers, 1969). In addition, innovations such as televised, individually guided, programmed and computer-assisted instruction appear to offer greater opportunities for students to choose what, how much, at what rate and the method with which they wish to learn. However, Carlson (1965) has noted self-directed student learning may be unconsciously or consciously sabotaged by instructors who perceive it to threaten the traditional role of the teacher as one who governs the substance and pace of learning. Thus it is felt that research is needed to identify teacher communication behavior which will facilitate self-directed student learning.

Previous research has shown that "integrative" (Anderson, 1937), "learner-centered" (Withall, 1949) and "indirect influence" (Flanders, 1959) instructor communication styles have produced significantly greater learning of academic material and significantly more favorable attitudes toward teachers (Anderson, et al., 1946; Amidon and Hough, 1967; and Flanders, 1968). This research demonstrated that teaching styles which emphasized questioning, clarifying and accepting behaviors were more effective than styles emphasizing information and direction giving.

The value of the previous research for the facilitation of self-directed learning is, however, limited. This research has been exclusively content-oriented. It measured only the effects of teacher classroom communication in regard to the presentation and discussion of the subject matter content

materials. It did not examine the performance of questioning, clarifying and accepting teacher behavior to elicit and process student feedback about the effectiveness of the teacher's own communication behavior. It is felt that the previous research could be usefully extended by making both the course content materials and the teacher's communication effectiveness the focus of the teacher-student interaction. This addition to the previous research might be termed instructional metacommunication since the instructor and the students would be communicating about the teacher's own classroom communication behavior. It is felt that greater self-directed student learning might be achieved when the teacher's questioning, clarifying and accepting behavior is used for both instructional metacommunication and content discussion rather than for course content discussion alone.

Additional Effects for Students

The use of instructor questioning, clarifying and accepting behavior for metacommunication and course content rather than for content discussion alone should also lead to greater student satisfaction and trust in the teacher. Mulder (1960) found that the exercise of power (i.e., determining the behavior of another person) led to greater satisfaction. In his experiments this satisfaction occurred when a person sent the problem solution or essential information to another person. When only content-centered questioning, clarifying and accepting behavior is used, the teacher and the students should jointly participate in the sending of essential information. Thus student satisfaction should be higher when metacommunication is also elicited because the flow of essential information concerning it proceeds entirely from the students to the teacher.

Trusting behavior in the communication process has been defined by Giffin and Patton (1971) as the "reliance upon communication behavior (speaking and/or listening) of another person while attempting to achieve a desired but uncertain objective in a risky situation." A risky or threatening situation is one in which the potential loss is greater than the potential gain if the trusted person does not prove to be reliable (Deutsch, 1958). It would appear that a student might regard the giving of metacommunicative feedback as being more risky or threatening than course-content feedback. If the teacher failed to accept the student's ideas about the course content material the student would be taking the risk that the teacher might esteem him less. However, if the instructor did not accept the student's corrective feedback about his teaching effectiveness, the student might take an even greater risk that the teacher would harbor dislike, anger, etc., for him in the future. Thus since the risk appears greater it would be expected that if the instructor did reliably accept corrective feedback about his classroom communication behavior, the interpersonal trust generated in the content and metacommunication condition would be greater than that in the course-content condition alone.

Effects for Teachers

It is felt that instructor-student metacommunication might be of great value to teachers by providing them with feedback about their basic communication skills and with data pertinent to effective communication with specific groups of students. Feedback in regard to basic communication skills might refer to rate, loudness, pitch and quality of voice, the use

of gesture and bodily movement, the maintenance of adequate eye and mental contact, etc. Thus feedback concerning the teacher's basic communication skills might concern the extent to which the students perceived him as dynamic and interesting or boring and dull. It would be presumed that the feedback a teacher received about his basic communication skills from one group of students would probably be generalizable to most other student groups as well.

Instructional metacommunication may also be of great value to the teacher in determining whether his presentation and/or clarification of course content materials is being understood. Here one might expect to find student differences in comprehension ability between freshman-sophomore, junior-senior and graduate level students. In addition, individual differences in academic aptitude and past experience within grade levels might frequently affect the students' comprehension of the teacher's messages. Thus it is felt that instructional metacommunication might enable teachers to more effectively tailor their messages to the specific needs and abilities of different students.

Feasibility of Instructional Metacommunication

Instructional metacommunication might provide teachers with the feedback necessary to facilitate self-directed student learning. However, most college teachers with whom the author has discussed this innovation have frankly stated that they would feel uncomfortable, anxious or even somewhat threatened about eliciting feedback concerning their verbal and/or nonverbal communication behavior in the classroom. Thus, even if research showed that instructional metacommunication significantly increased student learning, satisfaction and

trust, there is some question as to whether it might be reasonable to expect that teachers would be willing to elicit such feedback from students. In addition, there is also some question as to what type of training might be necessary to enable teachers to successfully incorporate instructional metacommunication into their classroom teaching.

Utilization of Instructional Metacommunication

The author felt that it would be valuable to gain some experience with instructional metacommunication since he had not previously elicited such feedback from students. The author made arrangements to team teach a course during the winter quarter, 1972, with three faculty members from the College of Education at Wright State University. The course was taught for the first time last winter, 1971, by the same three professors.¹

The course is an experimental graduate course in self-directed learning. The students develop behavioral objectives for improved interpersonal communication effectiveness which they share and discuss with other students in small groups. Each faculty member teaches either alone or with another member of the team on at least three of the ten weekly meetings of the course. After giving a forty to seventy minute lecture and discussion the professors elicit feedback from the students. This metacommunication period lasts for ten to twenty minutes.

The author found that one of the most interesting aspects of the metacommunication process was that of anticipation anxiety. The author experienced varying levels of anxiety about "imagined" student metacommunication before each of his three lecture-discussions.

¹Dr. Marlene Bireley, Dr. Lilburn Hoehn and Dr. Wesley Huckins.

In preparing for his first lecture and feedback session the author felt very anxious about receiving corrective feedback from the students. Thus for the first session it was the author's goal to use questioning, clarifying and accepting behavior to elicit corrective feedback without becoming defensive. The author found that he was able to achieve this goal quite easily--so easily, in fact, that he realized his anticipation anxiety had led him to overestimate the degree of sting or pain which student corrective feedback might inflict. He also found that his anticipation anxiety had led him to underestimate the amount of student feedback that would be positive. Before his final two lecture-discussions the author found that anticipation anxiety was experienced, but that the intensity of this feeling was much less.

The author found that the metacommunicative feedback following his first lecture-discussion focused upon his basic communication skills and that the feedback after his second and third lectures concerned his treatment of the content materials. For example, after the first lecture-discussion the students reported he had conveyed and stimulated interest in the subject matter, had maintained good eye contact with them, and had spoken loudly enough to be easily heard. However, some of the students reported that he had spoken too rapidly at times and thus his enunciation was not always clear. In addition, several students stated that he had assumed a higher level of entry knowledge than they possessed and had thus talked over their heads. The author found this latter feedback very interesting because he had, in fact, assumed a high level of entry knowledge. Since he was discussing models of the communication process he had assumed that most of these graduate students would feel the topic was very elementary.

The metacommunicative feedback after the author's final two lecture-discussions was content centered. The students commented upon such matters as whether the relative amounts of time devoted to lecture and class discussion had been adequate for their understanding and consideration of various concepts and topics. In addition, the students also expressed their evaluations as to how stimulating, interesting and/or valuable those evenings' classes had been for them.

The other three members of the teaching team had stated at the beginning of the quarter that they had been "bombed" during the metacommunication sessions the previous year with corrective feedback about their basic communication skills. However, the feedback they have received this year has been more positive than negative and very little of the latter has concerned their basic communication skill. Thus it appears that they have profited from the student feedback they received last winter. In addition, they have each reported that they feel considerably less anxious about receiving metacommunicative feedback this year. Of course, it is difficult to determine whether this reduction of their anticipation anxiety is the result of their previous metacommunication experience, improved performance, or both.

Two of the three members of the teaching team who taught the course last year have begun to incorporate instructional metacommunication into their other classroom teaching. One uses it quite frequently when he feels unsure whether the students are understanding his messages. The other professor has thus far limited his elicitation of metacommunicative feedback to the last week of his academic quarter classes. The author also requested metacommunicative feedback for the first time in his regularly scheduled classes during the last week of the winter quarter and found the feedback to be very informative and helpful.

Training in Instructional Metacommunication

Having had only limited experience receiving metacommunicative feedback, the author's thoughts are highly tentative as to what type of training will best enable instructors to successfully incorporate instructional metacommunication into their daily classroom teaching. The structure of the above mentioned course is itself a form of training program which enables the instructors to learn by doing and by observing the teaching and feedback received by the other members of the instructional team. In addition, the instructors also learn by getting together after each class to share their thoughts and feelings about the evening. Thus it is possible that this course might serve as a training model for instructional metacommunication.

Seminars or workshops might be designed in which teachers would "teach" their peers and receive feedback from them. The workshop setting would provide instructors with a safe, supportive environment in which they could begin to elicit and process feedback about their teacher communication behavior. An underlying assumption of workshop training might be that teachers are only likely to integrate instructional metacommunication into their classroom teaching when they feel it can greatly enhance their teaching effectiveness--over and above whatever benefits may accrue to their students. Thus the behavioral objectives of the workshop might be to train teachers to elicit, clarify and accept metacommunicative feedback and to achieve basic communication delivery skill. After the teacher has achieved these objectives, he could then further increase his classroom effectiveness by eliciting metacommunicative feedback in regard to the specific needs and interests and/or different knowledge and ability levels of his students.

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