

Together for good: Aspects of supportive communication between tertiary classmates that lead to academic success



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ABSTRACT

How well classmates communicate support with each other may significantly influence how well they learn and their commitment to learning. This study asked students which aspects of supportive communication they use with each other and which aspects they regard as most important for successful study. One hundred polytechnic students participated in this study. They rated how frequently they experienced and how influential they considered 18 aspects of supportive communication between classmates for study success. The students regarded many aspects of supportive communication influential but few aspects were present in most instances. They experienced and valued able and motivated supporters, and supportive relationships with classmates the most. Students in similar years of study experienced and valued similar aspects of supportive communication. Training a whole class in supportive communication may develop positive shared values among the students and a climate that encourages mutual support. Courses that provide ongoing activities and opportunities for students to develop their skills in communicating support may produce more successful students.

KEYWORDS

Tertiary education, supportive communication, academic success, student relationships

Introduction

It is reasonable to assume that many students would communicate about their study more with their classmates than with their lecturers or families, since they share the learning experience together. Therefore, how classmates communicate support may significantly affect how students learn and their commitment to learning, which influence their success. The study of supportive communication investigates the messages, behaviour and interactions of people who seek to improve others'

psychological state through a supportive relationship (Burlleson et al., 1994; Burlleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Jones & Bodie, 2014).

Research in supportive communication has focused on supporters' characteristics (Burlleson, 1982), person-centred support (Jones & Burlleson, 1997), recipients' evaluations of support (Goldsmith et al., 2000), elements of messages (MacGeorge et al., 2004), the processes used (Burlleson, 2009), the supporter-recipient relationship (Feng & MacGeorge, 2010), and supportive listening (Jones, 2011). Previous research has not significantly investigated supportive communication in groups or in different contexts such as education or health. An inductive investigation of supportive communication experienced by first-year tertiary students revealed the aspects *they* felt were significant (Thompson, 2008), but how students value aspects that *research* regards as significant is unknown. This study sought to discover which aspects of supportive communication tertiary classmates use in their mutual support, which aspects they value as helping academic success, and which aspects they regard as most valuable.

Identifying the researched aspects of supportive communication that are experienced and valued by students will inform advice and training about how they can help each other manage their study. Maximising the effectiveness of supportive communication among tertiary students could significantly improve their learning experience, could help them avoid and overcome behaviours that lead to failure, could build their commitment toward studying, and could help them develop skills in their field of study.

Literature review

The few studies into supportive communication in tertiary education have shown that it benefits students. Supportive communication creates a positive learning climate (Barker & Garvin-Doxas, 2004) which can promote competence in study (Glomo-Narzoles, 2013). Students seek particular types of support (Myers, 1998) and different types of support reduce student stress and depression (MacGeorge et al., 2005). Even instant messaging can communicate support effectively (Timmis, 2012).

Since research has focused little on supportive communication in tertiary learning environments, reviewing what research has found about communicating support in general contexts may help us consider how it could apply for learners. This review identifies and describes eighteen aspects in five areas that influence successful supportive communication. It profiles features of supporters and their relationships that direct supportive conversations, it describes how certain messages and behaviour enhance supportive interactions, and it examines how people can process supportive encounters.

Effective supporters are capable and motivated

Aspect 1. Supporters' motivation. Effective supporters are motivated to relieve distress, motivated to act appropriately, and are confident of improving a recipient's state (Bodie, 2013; Burlleson et al., 2005; Hermanto et al., 2017).

Aspect 2. Supporters' abilities. Effective supporters organise their thinking to understand social situations, they use a range of supportive messages, and they plan responses to obstacles (Bodie, 2013; Burleson & Caplan, 1998). These supporters work towards several goals at once, including mutual support and appropriate behaviour (Dillard, 1997; Goldsmith, 1992). They centre their support on the person, deal with their own reactions, clarify the issues, and help the person view their situation differently (Burleson et al., 1996; Jones & Hansen 2014; Keaton et al., 2015).

Tertiary students navigate an extended period of transition into a new field, and new students must also navigate the learning environment and master the skills of learning. Motivated classmates who are skilled in communicating support could significantly help students understand and adapt to this transition.

Supportive relationships are appropriate, sincere, interested and committed

Aspect 3. Supporters' character. People listen to supporters who are optimistic, honest, transparent, and credible (Bodie & Jones, 2012; Burleson, 2009; Glomo-Narzoles, 2013; MacGeorge et al., 2008).

Aspect 4. Supporters' roles. Relationships with colleagues provide the best practical support for the workplace (Burleson et al., 1996; Metts et al., 1994).

Aspect 5. Supporters' listening. Relationships are strengthened when supporters listen to and understand others' problems, and when they respect people's feelings and values (Glomo-Narzoles, 2013). Supportive relationships develop empathy when people share concerns equally, when they affirm each other's messages, and when they keep their mutual communication private (Dillenburg & Traum, 1996; Jones & Bodie, 2014; Timmis, 2012).

Aspect 6. Supporters' bonds. Supporters' appropriate eye-contact and warm body language communicate closeness (Jones & Bodie, 2014), and people increasingly value communication skills as their relationship deepens (Westmyer & Myers, 1996). Continuous, reliable relationships are built through frequent supportive messages over time (Solomon & Vangelisti, 2010; Timmis, 2012), and people accept advice best from close, long-time supporters (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006).

Providing frequent opportunities and activities for students to develop trusting relationships could enhance supportive communication in classes and student success.

Practical, responsive messages delivered well can meet people's needs

Aspect 7. Meeting needs. Messages focused on people's personal emotional and relational needs can validate their feelings and opinions, can encourage them to reassess their thinking, and can restore their esteem (Burleson, 1994, 2007, 2009). Advice that people can understand, that can be implemented, and that can solve the problem with few disadvantages, positively influence people's perceptions and coping (MacGeorge et al., 2004; MacGeorge et al., 2008).

Analysing problems correctly and focusing emotional support on the person who asked for it has positive outcomes (Feng, 2009; Goldsmith, 2000; Strom & Boster, 2011). Matching supportive messages to problems bolsters people's efforts and creates lasting change (Burleson & Goldsmith,

1998). Messages that address what people want and are clear about supporters' intentions provide strong support (Bodie, 2013; Burlleson, 2009). While reappraising problems requires time and effort, the change it creates can be deep and enduring (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993; Donnelly & Murray, 1991).

Aspect 8. Message choices. How a message is arranged, its tone and accompanying body language may provoke intense reactions (Burlleson, 2009). People respond to how long a message is, how complicated it is, how it tries to help, and its time and place in the conversation (Feng, 2009; Jacobson, 1986; Neff & Karney, 2005).

Aspect 9. Message delivery. People also respond to supporters' fluency, speaking pace, pitch, volume and whether they hesitate, pause or go silent (Bullis & Horn, 1995; Dolin & Booth-Butterfield, 1993). Eye-contact, smiling, and pleasing scents and songs can temporarily improve people's feelings and performance (Burlleson, 2009; Sarason et al., 1985).

Training students to match, construct and deliver effective supportive messages may significantly help their classmates' study.

Supportive interactions are respectful, articulate and thoughtful

Aspect 10. Validating emotions. Supporters who consider a person's whole message, who ask questions, who disregard people's errors in explaining problems, and who legitimise people's feelings without judging, encourage them to describe their experiences in more detail (Bodie, St. Cyr, et al., 2012; Keaton et al., 2015; Miller et al., 1983).

Aspect 11. Describing feelings. Supporters who can describe another person's sensations in words are more able to interpret recipients' emotions appropriately, and can adjust their thoughts, feelings and behaviours towards giving support (Jones & Hansen, 2014).

Aspect 12. Retelling events. When supporters co-narrate a person's event with them, and analyse it methodically from different perspectives, a positive understanding of it can be established for the person (Burlleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Clark, 1993; Jones, 2011; Keaton et al., 2015).

Respectful, articulated, and thoughtful classmates may become valuable supporters.

People assess their problems, supportive messages, the relationship and themselves

Aspect 13. Estimating problems. People who think their problems cannot be controlled see advice about them as intrusive and unsupportive, and people with distressing problems consider how well supportive messages account for their feelings (Burlleson, 2009; MacGeorge et al., 2008). A problem's severity, what the message of support says, and the timing of messages affect people's willingness to accept support (Bodie & Burlleson, 2008).

Aspect 14. Message interpretation. People evaluate messages by how appropriate, effective and supportive they are. People evaluate advice on how persuasive it is, and they evaluate how comforting it is by its sensitivity, helpfulness and support (Goldsmith et al., 2000; Jones & Burlleson,

1997). Sophisticated messages that meet many needs are perceived positively, and people's evaluations significantly influence the effects and outcomes of supportive communication (Bodie, 2013; Bodie, Burleson, & Jones, 2012).

Aspect 15. Relationship interpretation. People engage in supportive communication when they perceive it to be needed and available, to be something they have some control over, and when they trust their supporters (Bodie & Burleson, 2008).

Aspect 16. Support judgements. People who consider themselves capable may reject supportive communication, while those anxious about their relationship with supporters may overly seek support (Sirois et al., 2016). Considering why a supporter would help leads people to see them positively (Lee & Ybarra, 2017). People who regard their connections with supporters highly are more willing to build positive and trusting communication (Bamel et al., 2012; Gasparič & Pečar, 2016; Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010).

People who think instinctively and emotively value both advice and emotional support, while those preferring slow and complex reasoning value only information (Feng & Lee, 2010). While cynicism or depression influence people's responses negatively, attending to non-judgemental support helps people receive and relate to supportive messages (Bodie & Burleson, 2008; Jones & Hansen, 2014). Training students to establish supportive relationships may open channels for support. Promoting transparent motives and processes in supportive conversations could help students support each other freely and openly.

Supportive communication can help how people think about problems

Aspect 17. Supportive focus. Simple problems may reveal other unmet goals that can distract people to choose inadequate solutions (Bodie, 2013). However, supportive conversations can give people opportunities to respond, a sense of control, and trust that can reduce their stress and improve their work (Bamel et al., 2012; Bodie & Burleson, 2008).

Aspect 18. Receivers' thinking. The ways people prefer to think and their skills in working with emotions, in organising and understanding social information, and in considering carefully, influence how they process supportive messages (Bodie & Burleson, 2008). People who are very upset have difficulty processing supportive messages carefully (Burleson, 2009). People who identify messages that consider their subjective, emotional and relational needs; who relate supporters' messages to what they already know; who consider many features of a problem; and who think systematically about relevant information, are less likely to use dysfunctional coping skills and are more able to process supportive communication (Bodie, 2013; Burleson, 2009; Jones & Hansen, 2014; Moskowitz et al., 1999).

Students affected by several important issues outside of study over which they have limited influence, may find classmates' support valuable. Training classmates to refocus students' thinking could help turn their minds towards positive outcomes.

These eighteen aspects of supportive communication from previous research were presented to tertiary students to discover which are the aspects they have experienced, which ones they value, and which are the most valuable to them.

Method

Participants

This study received approval from the University's Ethics Committee as this was part of the first author's 60-credit research report at Massey University. All participants consented for their participation. The total sample of participants ($N=100$) were students studying toward a degree or diploma at a city campus of a provincial New Zealand polytechnic. Most of the respondents were first year (28), second (25), third (20), and past third year (26). In terms of gender, 67 participants were female and 31 were male (two participants did not provide information about their gender). The respondents' age ranged from 16 to 30 or more years. Participants identified their ethnicity or nationality as Asian (9), European (17), Māori (29), New Zealand European (33), and Pacific (21). Ten students from this study identified with more than one ethnicity or nationality. Participants completed the survey either on printed forms or online on the Qualtrics platform. Their participation in the study was voluntary and there was no inducement or penalty for students' involvement in the research. In addition, no rewards were given to the respondents.

Instruments

For data collection purposes we employed the Student Academic Support Scale similar to that developed by Thompson and Mazer (2009). This scale uses a 5-point Likert scale measuring how frequently students experienced each of the supportive behaviours. The participants' responses regarding how often they saw each of the 18 aspects of supportive communication were: 1-never, 2-seldom, 3-about half the time, 4-most of the time, and 5-always. In addition, they were asked to assess how influential they perceived each aspect to be in supporting students toward success. They chose from: 1-not influential, 2-little influence, 3-some influence, 4-much influence, 5-essential. Demographic data collected from participants were the qualification they were studying, age, gender, ethnicity or nationality, year of study, and highest qualification gained.

Data analysis

Students' ratings of how often they experienced each aspect of supportive communication were averaged to identify the aspects that classmates in tertiary study used in their mutual support. Students' ratings of how influential each aspect was in supporting them to success were averaged to identify those they all valued as contributing to academic success. Comparing the average ratings of each aspect's influence identified those which the students regarded as most valuable to their academic success. The students' ratings were not weighted by any criteria. The aspects of supportive communication experienced by those surveyed are reported in Table 1. The influence of aspects of supportive communication on student success perceived by those surveyed are reported in Table 2.

If twenty or more students shared a common characteristic such as age group, gender, or ethnicity, then their ratings of how often they experienced each aspect were averaged, and their ratings for how influential each aspect was in supporting them to success were averaged. This amount of students was chosen as fewer would be less representative of the characteristic, and the number chosen (20) represented one in five, or one-fifth, of those surveyed (100). Comparing these averages for each aspect identified those most and least experienced and valued by students who shared the characteristic. For example, young students may experience and value aspects differently than older students.

Results

The averages for each aspect of supportive communication experienced by students were all greater than 2.5 out of 5, indicating that students had experienced each aspect more often than not in their supportive conversations. Students experienced motivated, close classmates of good character the most of all the aspects (see Table 1).

The averages for the influence of each aspect of supportive communication by students were all greater than 3 out of 5, indicating that students found each aspect more influential than not in their supportive conversations. The aspects that students considered most influential were concerned with supporters and their relationships. They held the highest regard for communication from close classmates who connected often to validate emotions; and from credible, motivated classmates who listened well (see Table 2).

Table 1: Aspects of supportive communication experienced by tertiary students

| Aspect | Mean | SD | Students' rating |
|-----------------------------|------|-------|---------------------|
| Supporters' motivation | 3.84 | 0.814 | most of the time |
| Supporters' bonds | 3.69 | 0.837 | most of the time |
| Supporters' roles | 3.65 | 0.821 | most of the time |
| Supporters' character | 3.52 | 0.890 | most of the time |
| Supporters' listening | 3.45 | 0.866 | about half the time |
| Supporters' abilities | 3.44 | 0.874 | about half the time |
| Recipients' thinking | 3.31 | 0.973 | about half the time |
| Validating emotions | 3.30 | 0.901 | about half the time |
| Supportive focus | 3.28 | 0.965 | about half the time |
| Message delivery | 3.28 | 0.987 | about half the time |
| Meeting needs | 3.25 | 0.943 | about half the time |
| Describing feelings | 3.23 | 1.046 | about half the time |
| Message choices | 3.06 | 1.011 | about half the time |
| Retelling events | 3.04 | 0.847 | about half the time |
| Message interpretation | 2.89 | 1.005 | about half the time |
| Estimating problems | 2.64 | 1.055 | about half the time |
| Support judgements | 2.62 | 0.860 | about half the time |
| Relationship interpretation | 2.52 | 0.821 | about half the time |

Table 2: Perceived influence of aspects of supportive communication on student success by tertiary students

| Aspect | Mean | SD | Students' rating |
|-----------------------------|------|-------|------------------|
| Supporters' roles | 3.93 | 0.865 | much influence |
| Supporters' bonds | 3.87 | 0.864 | much influence |
| Validating emotions | 3.87 | 0.793 | much influence |
| Supporters' motivation | 3.83 | 0.752 | much influence |
| Supporters' listening | 3.82 | 0.770 | much influence |
| Supporters' character | 3.81 | 0.843 | much influence |
| Message delivery | 3.75 | 0.928 | much influence |
| Meeting needs | 3.68 | 0.948 | much influence |
| Describing feelings | 3.66 | 0.918 | much influence |
| Supporters' abilities | 3.65 | 0.782 | much influence |
| Recipients' thinking | 3.63 | 0.918 | much influence |
| Relationship interpretation | 3.53 | 0.939 | much influence |
| Supportive focus | 3.52 | 0.892 | much influence |
| Estimating problems | 3.52 | 0.844 | much influence |
| Message choices | 3.47 | 0.903 | some influence |
| Message interpretation | 3.47 | 0.994 | some influence |
| Support judgements | 3.45 | 0.876 | some influence |
| Retelling events | 3.14 | 0.906 | some influence |

Year in study

Results for students of different ages, gender and ethnicity/nationality confirmed the findings of previous research in supportive communication. Of interest were the differences in the experiences and ratings of students in different years of study. First-years saw the most classmate support of all students – all the aspects of supporters and messages and most of the aspects of relationships and interactions – significantly more than other students. They saw close, credible classmates, motivated to listen well and communicate support skilfully, more often than students in other years. They saw classmates describe and validate emotions, and organise and deliver messages that met their needs well, more often than other year groups.

Second-year students did not see and value classmates who listen, think carefully and deliver messages that met their needs well, as much as students in other years. They saw their peers overwhelmed by their problems, they saw classmates change focus in conversations, and they saw friends reject support because they considered themselves capable and they undervalued connections. Second-year students saw these behaviours more often than students in other years.

Third-year students saw more aspects of supportive communication most of the time than students in their second year. These participants saw more classmates describe feelings and fewer classmates change their focus in conversation than students in other years. Those who had studied for more than three years saw more classmates that think carefully about the supportive messages they receive and their relationships with those who give them.

Discussion

That students experience of all the aspects of supportive communication described by research validates each aspect's contribution to communicating support. They experience close, credible classmates who connect often and are motivated to communicate support most of the time. This aligns with reports that close relationships with trustworthy and likeable helpers who are similar to the person and motivated to communicate support, make people more receptive to that support (Bodie, 2013; Burlleson, 2009; Feng & MacGeorge, 2006; Metts et al., 1994). These findings suggest that the people who support students the most are likely to be their classmates.

Students highly regard communication from close classmates who connect often and who validate emotions, and from credible, motivated classmates who listen well. This is in line with findings reported by Burlleson (2009). Burlleson noted that a person receives and evaluates support more favourably from someone they feel close to such as a co-worker than from other people. The students' regard also aligns with reports that helpers who actively listen without judgement, who ask questions and who use rhetorical resources to respond to people's emotional needs, encourage greater disclosure from people (Keaton et al., 2015). This suggests that the best people to support students in their study are their classmates.

According to Timmis (2012) "a sense of mutuality, social affinity, a connection to personal needs, a close intimacy and shared history have all been noted as affective contributions towards motivating collaborative partnerships" (p. 15). These contributions may be evident among first-year students who share similar needs and a new study adventure together, motivating them to form closer collaborations with each other than do students in later years. Results from our study for first-years support Timmis' findings that part of their shared culture included being constantly available to each other, understanding and empathising with shared needs and fears, and motivating each other towards their shared goals. Encouraging strong connections and training in supportive communication among first-year students may greatly enhance their study success.

Second-year students experience less listening and emotional validation, fewer descriptions of feelings and messages delivered well, and fewer messages meeting their needs. They do see more classmates rejecting support due to overwhelming problems, to undervaluing connections, and to overestimating their capability. This group values and sees the least support of all students. Burlleson (2009) reported that "motivation to process supportive messages is influenced by both situational factors (e.g., severity of problem, timing of message, message content) and individual-difference factors (e.g., perceived support availability, attachment style, affiliative need, locus of control)" (p. 29). All these factors appear to influence second-year students' motivation to seek and share support among their classmates, likely diminishing the quality of support they experience among each other. Alerting second-year students to these factors and encouraging motivation among them may improve their mutual support and their study. It is possible that second-year students may have been overwhelmed from the connections with their classmates in their first year, and disillusioned with the quality of that support. If first-year students are trained in communicating support and become skilled in helping their classmates, then second-year students may be more receptive to seeking and providing mutual support.

Third-year students see classmates as more influential to study success and they see more instances of support being accepted than do second-years. These patterns imply that training in supportive communication is likely to be wanted and practiced most by young first-years, that 'middle' students may need significant assistance in developing and using their support networks, and that experienced students may have developed skills that could help their younger classmates.

Limitations and conclusions

Limitations

Having a small sample of data from only one institute in New Zealand may limit the transfer of information gained to only similar institutes; however, some findings may still apply generally in the tertiary-education context. Because students were asked about their experiences for the whole of their tertiary study, trends in support frequency and significance may not hold for their current year of study in their programme. Seeking students' evaluations assesses the aspects' efficacy subjectively – some aspects may be significant but not valued by the students. The study does not investigate features of the context that research in supportive communication has not addressed yet – class size and composition, and academic discipline may influence the nature and helpfulness of supportive communication. Training classmates in how to maximise their mutual support for tertiary study requires further investigation of how the features of specific contexts influence the communication of support. Longitudinal studies maybe beneficial in assessing students' changing needs for support over the course of their study.

Conclusions

Discovering the aspects of supportive communication that tertiary students employ and value is an essential early step in investigating how to build skills in supportive communication among students. Knowing the differences between the aspects of supportive communication that students experience with those most valued can help raise students' awareness of their support needs, can help inform their potential training in mutual support, and have a potential to guide staff when advising students.

Students experience all the aspects of supportive communication described by research so all should be included when training them in supportive communication. Since first-year classmates are the most motivated to share support, training them could significantly impact many students, and may help their later years of study.

Students seek support from close classmates they see often more than from others who may have greater skills, thus from a pedagogical point of view, training whole classes may be more effective than training champions within classes. Skilled supporters may also find themselves overwhelmed by the needs of their classmates. Whole-class training may also develop positive shared values towards supportive communication, and a climate that encourages credible mutual support in the class. Classes should provide activities and ongoing opportunities for students to develop the knowledge, trust and cohesion needed to communicate support among themselves effectively.

Because supporters and their relationships are valued and experienced by students most of the time, developing other aspects of supportive communication among students needs to employ and develop these existing strong networks. Targeting advice and training for students that considers their development in tertiary study may help them avoid and overcome the challenges that each year-group face. Guiding first-year students to enhance the quality of their support; 'middle' students to develop deeper, credible connections; and senior students to share their expertise, may improve their study experiences and achievements. Thus, raising the awareness of different groups of students about strengths and challenges in their supportive communication may motivate them to seek guidance to work with these to their benefit. In addition, clarifying what support means to different participants is a great starting point for providing targeted supportive communication.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our participants who willingly gave their time and thoughtful reflection to complete a challenging questionnaire; to the lecturers who invited the first author into their classes to explain and distribute surveys; to colleagues who provided encouragement and advice on how to proceed with the study; to my supervisor who unfailingly delivered quality feedback almost immediately every time; and to my son who faithfully kept home running smoothly while I buried myself in study.

This work was part of the 60-credit research report of Andrew Mock at Massey University.

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