
Translating Immediacy Behavior in the Online Classroom

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Immediacy behaviors (behaviors that draw one person to another) in the classroom have been shown to improve student performance and satisfaction (e.g., Wilson, 2006). Because immediacy behaviors are of a verbal and nonverbal nature, translating them to the online classroom is challenging. One translation is to send emails to students to increase rapport and convey care and concern. The purpose of this “how to” manuscript is to present a technique designed to increase rapport in an online class. More specifically, this paper provides a description of the effects of “checking in” emails on student engagement and performance in an online course. Overall, students are responsive to these emails. Additionally, course grades were higher for those who did respond. This activity suggests that personalized emails are a way of improving rapport and grades in an online course.

Immediacy Behavior in the Online Classroom: Effects on Student Performance and Engagement

One of the strongest predictors of good teaching is whether an instructor is approachable (Landrum & Stowell, 2013). Approachability is a form of immediacy, which are behaviors that are designed to draw one person to another. In the classroom, these can take the form of verbal behaviors, such as calling students by their name, asking how they feel about things, and giving feedback to students. They can also be nonverbal, such as looking at students when talking, moving around the classroom while teaching, and gesturing while talking to the class (Immediacy in the Classroom: Research and Practical Implications, 2014).

Immediacy in the classroom has been construed and measured in a variety of ways. For example, Rogers (2015) describes an instrument (LAI: Learning Alliance Instrument) that measures the strength of the *alliance* between teachers and students from the student’s perspective. Higher scores on the LAI have been shown to be positively related to learning. Similarly, Ryan (2014) developed a brief Professor-Student Rapport Scale, which measures student’s perceptions of *rapport* with their professors. Scores on this scale predict several important learning outcomes, such as

amount learned and actual learning. In an interesting conceptualization of immediacy, Jones (2010) proposes a *motivation* model that assesses the psychological components of student engagement. Known as the MUSIC model, the components include empowerment, usefulness, success, situational interest, individual interest, academic caring, and personal caring. Academic caring was shown to be the best predictor of instructor ratings, while perceptions of success was the best predictor of student achievement.

It is challenging to overstate the importance of these immediacy behaviors. There is ample research (e.g., Wilson, 2006; Wilson & Taylor, 2001) showing that the use of immediacy behaviors in the classroom increases student satisfaction and grades. Immediacy behaviors in the classroom are also correlated with improved affective and cognitive learning, perceived instructor competence, student motivation, and attendance and participation (Immediacy in the Classroom: Research and Practical Implications, 2014). Yet, all of this research focuses on immediacy behaviors in the face-to-face classroom, with little or no attention to online classrooms. It is not entirely clear how many of the immediacy behaviors (e.g., making eye contact, moving around the room) can or ought to be translated to the online setting. It may be that alternative forms of immediacy are required in an online classroom. For example, sending students a personalized email might let them know that their instructor cares about them. Of course, all instructors, both online and face-to-face, have the option of sending email to their students. Prior research shows that out-of-class communication is associated with student retention (Milem & Berger, 1997), academic performance (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Bliming, 1996), and positive affect for learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Legg and Wilson (2009) sent their students a welcoming email prior to the start of class in an effort to establish rapport. The results of their study showed that the email enhanced student motivation and improved students' attitudes toward the course and the instructor. It did not, however, have any impact on student performance.

The purpose of this manuscript is to describe, in a "how to" fashion, an intervention designed to increase immediacy. More specifically, the paper describes the use of personalized emails designed to establish rapport with students. The relationship between this type of immediacy behavior and student performance and engagement is an especially interesting one. There is research (e.g., Kinzie, 2010; Prince, 2004) showing that when

students are engaged (in the course material, with other students, and with the instructor), they perform better in the course.

Student Engagement with Instructor

One way that online instructors can express interest in students and show them that they care is to send “checking in” emails. In my courses, I send emails of this sort to students when the class is one-third of the way finished, and again when it is two-thirds of the way finished. At each point in time, students get one of two emails, depending on their current performance in the course. Students whose grade at each point in time (1/3 and 2/3 points) is a C or above receive this email:

Hi Jane,

We are about two-thirds of the way through the course! How is the class going for you? I note that you are doing well in the course, so keep up the good work. When you get a chance, can you send me an email to let me know how the class is working for you? Thanks so much!

While students whose grade is below a C receive this email:

Hi Joe,

We are about a third of the way through the course! How is the class going for you? Do you like the online format? I note that you seem to be struggling a bit in the course. What are some things you can do to help improve your performance in the course? When you get a chance, can you send me an email to let me know? Thanks so much!

Instructor Immediacy and Student Engagement and Performance

Anecdotally, this simple act of asking students how they are doing is one of the most rewarding and beneficial interactions I have with my students. First, the majority (about 70%) of the students take the time to respond to the email. Second, many (about 40%) of them express appreciation (and sometimes surprise) that a professor would take the time to send them a personalized email. Third, the emails are designed to encourage students to take a meta-cognitive approach to their reflections about their performance, including students who are doing well in the

course. For example, students comment on how the course assignments encourage them to apply the material to a real-life situation or how the course organization allows them to stay engaged in the material.

Recently, data was examined in an online introductory psychology course with 28 students, although note that this procedure was not intended to be a scientific study. More specifically, the number of students who responded to the emails (which might serve as a proxy for engagement), and student performance (grade in the course) was examined. Table 1 shows the percentage of students who responded to the “checking in” emails.

Table 1. Percentage of Students who Responded at Each Time

Time Period	Percent Responded
Email One (1/3 mark in the course)	75%
Email Two (2/3 mark in the course)	39%

This information suggest that students were more responsive to the first email than the second, which could suggest that they became less engaged over time. Another explanation is that students were less likely to respond at time two because they had already provided a response at time one, and that the second email was sent shortly after they were asked to provide mid-term feedback. In fact, this lower response rate for time two might reflect feedback saturation. So as not to burden students with requests for feedback, consider just sending emails at time one (assuming that instructors are also requesting mid-term feedback from students).

In addition to examining response rates, I students' course grades after the emails were sent, as well as their final course grade, were examined. It was anticipated that students who responded to the emails, and were presumably more engaged, would have higher grades than those who did not respond to the emails. As shown in Figure 1, students who responded to the emails had slightly higher grades than students who did not respond to the emails, indicating that students who were (presumably) more engaged performed better in the course. Note that this sample size is too small to justify any inferential statistical testing.

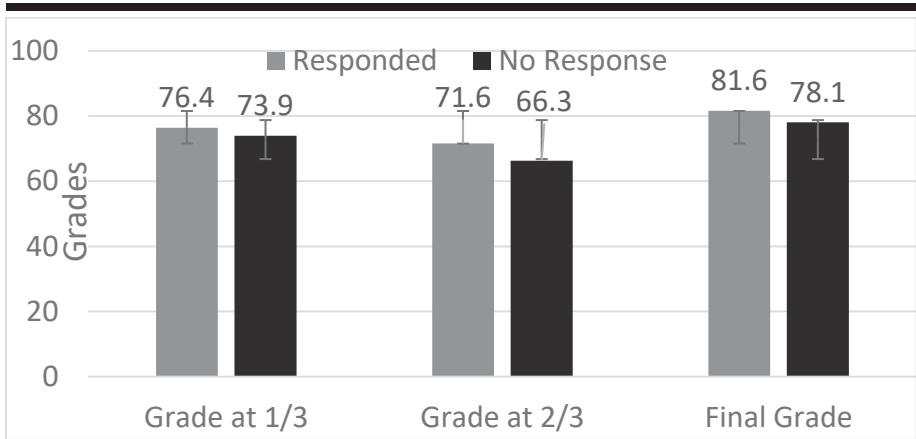


Figure 1. Response and grades at the one-third mark in the course.

As shown in Figure 2, students who responded to the email at the two-third mark in the course had higher grades at the two-third mark, and at the end of the course. This information also suggest that engagement with the instructor leads to better performance. Of course, the data at each time period could also suggest that students who were more engaged to begin with performed better in the course, regardless of the instructor emails. Again, note that this sample size is too small to justify any inferential statistical testing, so any generalizations should be made with caution.

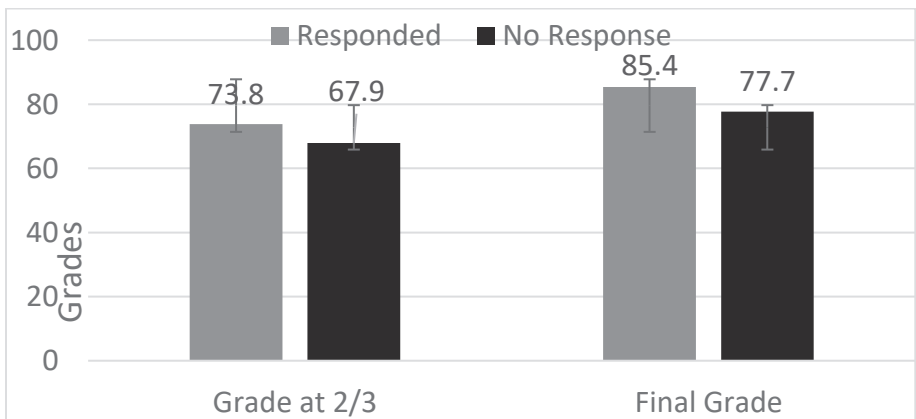


Figure 2. Response and grades at the two-third mark in the course.

Conclusion

The purpose of this manuscript was to describe an effort to display immediacy behaviors in the online classroom. Because the online classroom reduces the number of immediacy behaviors that instructors can display, it is important to try to partially imitate or create new immediacy behaviors. As we have seen in investigations of immediacy behaviors in face-to-face classroom settings, such behaviors have important and notable consequences for students. One of those consequences is student engagement. Johnson (2012) has outlined a number of behaviors that students exhibit when they are engaged, including interacting with other students, responding to questions, and asking questions. This suggests that there is indeed a relationship between students' response to "checking in" emails from their instructor and engagement in the course.

In the future, it would be interesting to explore these ideas more scientifically. For example, research could test the effects of responses to checking-in emails and engagement with the course by including a control group of students who do not receive these emails and then comparing course grades to students who do receive the emails. A design such as this would allow for a more stringent test of the effects of the emails on engagement and performance.

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