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Instructional immediacy in elearning



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Summary Instructor immediacy has been positively associated with many desirable academic outcomes including increased student learning. This study extends existing understanding of instructional immediacy behaviours in elearning by describing postgraduate nursing students' reflections on their own experience. An exploratory, descriptive survey design was used to collect qualitative data. Participants were asked what behaviours or activities help to create rapport or a positive interpersonal connection (immediacy) between students and their online teacher(s). Thematic analysis of the data revealed three main themes: acknowledging and affirming student's personal and professional responsibilities; providing clear and timely information; and utilising rich media. These findings give lecturers insight into instructional strategies they may adopt to increase immediacy in elearning and hence improve student learning outcomes.

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Introduction

In recent years there has been rapid development of computing and telecommunications technology. At the same time teaching and learning using computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become increasingly more common in higher education and this growth is expected to continue (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Ni & Aust, 2008). While elearning provides opportunities, it also poses challenges to both teachers and students, as it increases the likelihood of geographic, temporal and psychological distance. There is often limited opportunity for the transmission of non-verbal messages in many online courses, particularly those that are primarily text-based and which offer no audio and video elements. This can create feelings of

isolation and disconnectedness in students and lead to difficulties in the development of positive student–teacher relationships, which ultimately may affect student learning outcomes. One practical instructional strategy that may decrease the psychological distance between students and teachers in online interaction, and thereby potentially improve student learning outcomes, is the use of instructor immediacy behaviours. This refers to teachers' communication behaviours that reduce the perceived psychological distance between teacher and student (Ni & Aust, 2008; Woods & Baker, 2004).

The term 'immediacy' was first described by social psychologist Albert Mehrabian (1969, p. 203) as 'those communication behaviours that enhance closeness to, and nonverbal interaction, with another.' He argued that people are drawn towards persons and things they like, evaluate highly and prefer (Mehrabian, 1969, p. 1). Andersen (1979) later introduced the concept of teacher immediacy into higher education describing immediacy as a nonverbal

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manifestation of high affect, demonstrated through such strategies as maintaining eye contact, leaning closer, and smiling. Teacher immediacy behaviours were further developed by Gorham (1988) to include verbal behaviours such as responding promptly, addressing students by name, and using personal examples. Today, the term 'instructional immediacy', rather than 'teacher immediacy' is used in connection with the online environment. It includes those behaviours that an instructor takes to increase students' sense of human interaction, instructor presence, caring and connectedness (Kim & Bonk, 2010). These behaviours help build close relationships or feelings of closeness between instructors and students (Gunter, 2007; Richmond, 2002).

There has been a substantial body of research that points to the impact of immediacy behaviours on students' learning experiences. Immediacy has been positively correlated to student affect (Baker, 2003), affective learning (Allen, Witt, & Wheelles, 2006; Baker, 2004, 2010; Russo & Benson, 2005), and cognitive learning (Allen et al., 2006; Baker, 2003, 2010; Gunter, 2007). Immediacy is also positively related to increased emotional and cognitive engagement in a course (Velez & Cano, 2008), student learning satisfaction (Arbaugh, 2001; Russo & Benson, 2005), more positive student evaluations of a teacher (McCroskey, Richmond, Sailinen, Fayer, & Barraclough, 1995), increased student participation in online discussions (Kucuk, 2009), reduced student attrition rates (Gunter, 2007), student motivation to learn (Arbaugh, 2001; Baker, 2004, 2010; Christophel, 1990; Gunter, 2007; Velez & Cano, 2008), and student self-efficacy beliefs (Gunter, 2007). In addition immediacy is believed to underpin social presence which also has many positive beneficial effects (Baker, 2010).

The online teaching environment requires different immediacy behaviours from those witnessed in conventional classrooms (Kim & Bonk, 2010). For example, courses that depend on asynchronous (time-delayed) interactions require teachers to project immediacy exclusively through written messages. A number of studies have been undertaken to identify key immediacy behaviours in the online environment. These include the use of humour (Kucuk, 2009), addressing students by name in correspondence (Gorham, 1988; Gunter, 2007; Melrose & Bergeron, 2006), using pronouns such as 'we', 'us' and 'ours' instead of 'you', 'me', and 'I' (Richmond, 2002), the use of emoticons to create a supportive tone (Gunter, 2007; Tu, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002); the use of self-disclosure (Kucuk, 2009; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001), the sharing of personal experiences (Gorham, 1988; Melrose & Bergeron, 2006), responding promptly to students (Kim & Bonk, 2010; Gorham, 1988; Melrose & Bergeron, 2006), and posting introductions that include pictures and appropriate personal and professional information (Kim & Bonk, 2010; Melrose & Bergeron, 2006). A study by Melrose and Bergeron (2006) exploring health student's perceptions of immediacy described the 'checking in' with students individually using private email and responding empathetically to students' expressions of individual needs as further immediacy behaviours.

Rapid growth and development of computer-mediated communication tools has led to new and/or improved technology, such as web conferencing, being introduced into course design. This has led to a rapidly changing online

learning and teaching environment. Despite the importance of immediacy the literature review revealed no recent Australian studies exploring postgraduate nursing students' perceptions of immediacy behaviours in the online environment. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the current perceptions of postgraduate nursing students at one regional Australian university.

Aims of the study

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of instructor immediacy behaviours among postgraduate nursing students in the online environment. The specific question that guided the study was what behaviours or activities help to create rapport or a positive interpersonal connection (immediacy) between students and their online teacher(s). The explication of these instructional immediacy behaviours that students find helpful may guide or inform the practice of lecturers in the online environment, and thereby potentially improve student learning outcomes.

Method

Design

The study was conducted using an exploratory, descriptive survey design; qualitative data was collected.

Data collection

Data was collected using an online survey. The survey method was selected because of its ability to be given to a large number of research participants (Hansen, 2006). The survey had a number of sections. The first section of the survey requested general information, such as gender, previous experience studying in an online environment, and confidence with studying in a fully online environment. The data collected was used to form a profile of the student group using statistical analysis.

The second section of the survey explored the learner's perception of instructor behaviours that helped create rapport, or a positive interpersonal connection (immediacy), between themselves and the online lecturer/tutor. Open-ended questions were used and space was provided for students to make written comments. The open-ended nature of the survey was adopted to ensure that responses reflected the views of the participants, and not those of the researcher, as may occur when a standardised questionnaire is used (Hansen, 2006).

Ethical consideration

The institutional Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval. Potential participants were sent an email carrying an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, and details of how to access the survey online. Consent for the project was implied with the voluntary and anonymous return of the survey.

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