Credibility and Immediacy in a First Time College Instructor

Situation Overview. As a first time college instructor, I am teaching a history of electronic media course for which I have little background, knowledge or expertise. I wanted to use instructional communication scales to examine my credibility and immediacy in the classroom to see if I can improve satisfaction and learning for my students.

As a grad student, I automatically assume my credibility is lower with students than it would be if I were a professor or even a full-time instructor. Combining this with my lack of mastery in the subject, I am concerned that my areas of deficiency will lead to a lack of respect from students and an associated lack of learning. Those concerns are exacerbated by the fact that my students often appear unengaged in class and participate little in discussion.

I am also examining immediacy, or the feeling of closeness and connection the students feel to the instructor. Since this course is a required course for each student in the class – either for their major or as a part of the Miami Plan sequence – they may not have positive attitudes about taking the class or about the subject matter. Sometimes they have studied the same material in other courses (a fault I do not consider my responsibility to fix since this is the text assigned to me, but it affects my classroom nonetheless).

Knowing this situation, I would like to increase the affective learning in the class, both to improve the students’ attitudes for and appreciation of the subject matter as well as possibly increasing participation in the classroom. According to instructional communication research, one of the best ways to increase affective learning is to increase teacher immediacy. I want to discover whether or not my students see me as an immediate teacher, and if not, find out what aspect of immediacy I can improve upon.

Method. I used the most common scales for each construct – The McCroskey and Teven (1999) Teacher Credibility Scale and the Richmond, McCroskey and Johnson Nonverbal Immediacy Scale.

On the day the scales were administered, 29 students attended class. For the competency aspect, students used a Likert-type scale with possibilities from 1 to 7. For the immediacy aspect, students had a Likert-type scale with choices ranging from 1 to 5.

Results. The results showed that my class rated me a 5.35 on competence, with a range of 4.1 to 6.5 and a standard deviation of .73. However, for caring and character the means were 6.32 and 6.29 respectively.
**Future Plans.** As I examine the results, I recognize some areas in which I can improve to show greater competence and increase caring and character even more.

For example, as I become more familiar with the subject matter, I will not have to correct myself in lecture, something I had to do twice this semester. I can also develop brief PowerPoint presentations for when I am lecturing. I wanted to avoid them, but I can see that using a PowerPoint allows me to speak more easily and reminds me of the topics to cover without having to look constantly at lecture outline notes. If I knew the material better, I probably wouldn’t need the outlines. However, in my situation, PP notes help me and the class stay on target, and that increases their impressions of my competence.

I can also develop more interactive class assignments and projects, and I can deliberately move around the room during lecture. Research indicates that both these activities increase immediacy and credibility.

The final technique I will employ is filming a class then reviewing the film to identify areas for improvement. While I know this exercise will be painful, I expect it to be illuminating as well.