Faculty Communication in the Undergraduate College Classroom:

A Student Perspective

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Abstract

Communication in the Undergraduate College Classroom: A Student Perspective

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There has been much research recognizing the importance of communication between students and faculty in the classroom environment. A positive climate and sense of belonging influence students’ perceptions of a supportive community in the college classroom. In these supportive classrooms, students are able to express themselves freely and openly in nonjudgmental ways that allow strong bonds to exist. Interpersonal relationships between instructors and students create a unique culture that can impact learning in the classroom. Although it has been argued the primary job of instructors is to promote learning (Ellis, 2004), research shows a link between interpersonal relationships and learning (Worley, Titsworth & Cornett-Devito, 2007).

This phenomenological study explored how student perceptions of instructor communication behaviors in undergraduate college classrooms influence the communication climate. Eight participants, all in their last semester of college, were asked a series of semi-structured questions to further understand their communication interactions with professors. The findings were classified into three themes. First was evidence of the importance of professor communication traits as demonstrated by both nonverbal and verbal means. The second theme was the presence of supportive behaviors shown by professors in and out of the classroom and
the final theme was the presence of defensive behaviors shown in and out of the classroom.

Results flowing from these themes showed, 1) Instructors exhibiting a friendly mood, showing happiness, approachability, and flexibility are more likely to create a positive communication climate, 2) Found the lack of verbal and nonverbal instructor communication reflecting the lack of desire to interact with students leads to a more negative and defensive communication climate, 3) Superiority to be a common theme among students when expressing negative interactions in the undergraduate college classroom.

Recommendations are made at both the individual and institutional level and center around the further development and understanding of the crucial role communication plays in the college classroom.
Signature Page

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Dedication

This dissertation, is dedicated to my grandparents Warren and Louise Lampson and Clark and Betty McConnell and my parents, Robin and Betty Lampson. Without all the hard work you exemplified in your life I would not have the desire or support to have finished college, let alone a doctorate degree. Thank you for always being my biggest fans throughout all I chose to accomplish. I love you.
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Introduction to the Problem

There has been much research recognizing the importance of communication between students and faculty in the classroom environment. A positive climate and sense of belonging influence students’ perceptions of a supportive community in the college classroom. In these supportive classrooms, students are able to express themselves freely and openly in nonjudgmental ways that allow strong bonds to exist. Interpersonal relationships that are formed are not exclusive to students, as this sharing of information and connections occur between instructor and students as well, one of the central components of learning. It is necessary to discuss the relationships of instructors and students because of the amount of research indicating the important role communication can have on the classroom learning environment (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007; Frisby & Martin, 2010).

For years, the notion of the instructor-student relationship focused on a very linear approach to learning and communication. The job of the instructor was to teach and “profess” information to the student, whose job was to learn to conceptualize and redistribute the information when necessary. This matches the early view of the communication model, which focused more on the approach that communication was one way, involving sending a message via a channel to a receiver (Schramm, 1954). Just as the understanding of early communication interactions has changed, so too has the understanding of the roles of the instructors and students toward a more collaborative approach to teaching and learning. It is now much more common for an instructor to encourage student interaction during the course of a typical lesson/lecture. As this relationship progresses, the instructor and students move past the traditional formal roles of teacher/student to develop a relationship more interpersonal in nature. Additionally, trust begins
to develop and students become more comfortable when asking for help and approaching their instructors for support. These relationships become more crucial as students rely on instructors not only for their teaching ability, but also for the role of academic advisor and mentor/advocate, when working through the maze of meeting course requirements and preparing to graduate and find a career.

Interpersonal relationships between instructors and students create a unique culture that can impact learning in the classroom. Although it has been argued the primary job of instructors is to promote learning (Ellis, 2004), research shows a link between interpersonal relationships and learning (Worley, Titsworth & Cornett-Devito, 2007). Additionally, Teven & McCroskey (1997), found instructors try to “facilitate a sense of connection in the classroom through communicative behaviors such as caring.” Worley et al. (2007) also identified creating a cohesive classroom environment as a skill required of instructors who demonstrate instructional communication competence. Clearly, the communication of instructors is a vital component in aiding the learning process of students. And although the relationships which develop between students and instructors are necessary, they are not always present in the classroom (Teven & Monte, 2008).

In order to further understand components of communication in teacher interaction with students, the “characteristic of caring” (Teven, 2001), along with additional variables must be analyzed. The manner in which teachers model this type of communication can be seen through their interaction habits of initiating conversation, referring to student’s first name, (Teven & Gorham, 1998), showing respect and empathy, and calling students by name (Teven & Hanson, 2004). Additionally, communication patterns displaying both defensive and supportive patterns are seen as being important in the instructor-student dynamic.
Statement of the Problem to be Researched

Communication researchers don’t have a descriptive understanding of the undergraduate perceptions of the communication climate in the college classroom which develops from interactions between instructor and student.

Purpose and Significance of the Problem

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how student perceptions of instructor communication behaviors in undergraduate college classrooms influence the communication climate. The majority of research, focusing on communication interactions between undergraduate students and instructors in the college classroom, is quantitative in nature. While this provides insight into the frequency and effects of specific defensive and supportive communication patterns, missing are the voices of the students to further understand their perceptions of their relationships with faculty.

Significance of the Problem

This phenomenological study is designed for the purpose of exploring the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate students in the college classroom, specifically the communication interactions with their instructors and the effects on the overall communication climate in the classroom.

In order to effectively dissect and explore students’ experience in the classroom, the areas of instructor effectiveness, instructor-student relationships and communication climate will be further explored.


Research questions

1. How do students describe the positive and negative elements of classroom climates?

2. What faculty behaviors do students perceive as contributing positively or negatively to classroom climate?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework is composed of three streams of literature. The first stream focuses on instructor effectiveness. The second stream focuses on specific communication techniques that instructors use to develop the instructor-student relationship and the communication climate in the classroom. The third stream focuses on the classroom communication climate and how it has been characterized or measured.

Researcher Stance

I am a social constructivist, believing that learning is an active social process that is ongoing both in and out of the classroom. We, as instructors, cannot separate the context of our course from this active process of learning and the manner in which information is exchanged: through communication. Using communication to teach, interpersonal relationships are formed, moving both the instructor and student beyond the formal, traditional role and into one involving more openness and trust. Because of this, the relationships which are formed in my courses end up teaching me, sometimes more than I believe my students end up learning by the end of a semester. Much of the information exchanged during the development of these relationships can be traced back to the process of forming the relationships themselves. This process occurs within the communication climate of the college classroom and becomes an important part of the instructor-student relationship regardless of the discipline taught.
Researcher Experience

Teaching college students for the past ten years in the area of communication, I have spent numerous occasions reflecting on my interactions both inside and outside the classroom. During one particular semester in 2011, upon hearing my nephew’s experience with his favorite college instructor, I was moved to start initiating more conversation with my students. I started asking students to meet me during office hours to begin the process of more meaningful interpersonal correspondence. After spending about a month meeting with students, I was overwhelmed with positive responses from students, thankful I was taking the time to initiate contact and deepen the traditional instructor-student relationship. It was through my attempt at showing care, and self-disclosure during these meetings, that I felt greater attention being placed on my course outcomes and expectations, and effort being made by my students.

Research Method

A phenomenological study is the most appropriate way to determine the lived experiences and perspectives of undergraduate communication students at the chosen four-year institution. In-depth interviews were conducted for analysis to determine themes and commonality among prior research and experiences as it relates to self-disclosure impacting the communication climate in the college classroom. Phenomenological research methods regard perceptions as the primary source of knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). These student perceptions were vital in further understanding the essence of instructor-student relationships.

The advantage of using qualitative phenomenological research leads to the addition of increasing the overall picture of a given topic and situation (Moustakas, 1994). This was especially important because of the overall lack of qualitative research on the subject of instructor-student relationships and its impact on the communication climate.
Since each individual student participant’s experience is unique, it was essential to look at their overall experiences as a group. Unlike the broad generalizations that could be made based on responses from a large population, qualitative research was designed to focus on individuals. The comprehensive descriptions of differing student experiences and perceptions may provide a rich data set best explained through qualitative means.

**Definition of Key Terms**

Self-disclosure - the willingness to reveal information that is not known to others and significant within the context of the classroom. This term has been studied heavily in interpersonal and group contexts.

Communication climate – the environment created by a communication interaction in an organization or among individuals

Supportive climate - communication interactions in which there are trust and respect between parties and positive group interactions.

Defensive climate - communication interactions that can lead to aggressive, attacking, angry, passive and withdrawing behaviors in which an individual feels threatened or anxious when in communication with others.

Immediacy - behavior that communicates approachability and closeness between individuals.

Nonverbal immediacy - nonverbal behaviors referring to psychological or physical distance to communicate liking such as distance, gestures, and touch.

Interpersonal relationships - connections between two or more individuals having varying levels of intimacy, trust, and interdependence
Instructor/teacher/professor - for the purpose of this study, each of these terms are used synonymously, referring to teaching in the college classroom, and will vary according to the terms used in referenced citations.

**Assumptions and Limitations**

I have made the assumption that not all instructors in the college classroom provide care or concern with their students and/or ultimately care about the communication climate they help create. Because of my experience utilizing self-disclosure in the classroom, and my knowledge on the subject, I have made the assumption that self-disclosure is a crucial part of the instructor/student relationship. Additionally, I am assuming the discipline of communication is just as important to all instructors regardless of their subject area expertise. This could be limiting because although I find the research to be a vital part of the college classroom experience, not all researchers or instructors could agree it is as beneficial to their own discipline. Furthermore, if the research is significant, how will this affect the further teaching and communication style of instructors and what will the implications be for instructors’ roles in the future?

**Summary**

Interpersonal relationships, affecting the communication climate, prove to be an integral part of the college classroom and overall learning experience. These relationships affect both instructor and student, impacting student learning and the exchange of communication in the classroom. Through the occurrence of communication language and behaviors, research has shown the connection between interpersonal communication and student learning. Where this
study aims to find significance is between instructor communication style and its impact on the communication climate of the college classroom.
Chapter 2: The Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore student perspectives of teachers’ communication behaviors in the college classroom. As a college education becomes increasingly more expensive, with sections heavily impacted among the higher education system in California, the need for effective class instruction and learning outcomes become increasingly vital to ensure a positive retention rate and student success. Many studies support the components of effective teaching by professors, which include: communicating their accessibility, approachability, and availability by modeling care in their personal interaction with students (Teven, 2001; Tinto, 1987). There have also been numerous studies supporting the link between these positive communication behaviors and the creation of a supportive communication climate, although the majority of research is quantitative in nature (Darling & Civikly, 1987; Gordon, 1988; Teven & Monte, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Trees, Kerssen-Griep & Hess 2009; Forward, Czech & Lee, 2011). Therefore, this study aims to further investigate, through qualitative means, the relationship between specific instructor behaviors and student learning as well as the defensive or supportive communication climates created in the classroom.

Literature Review

Instructor Effectiveness, Communication Qualities of Effective Instructors

Instructor effectiveness is a key component in this study because of its significant role in student retention and attrition. Student retention and attrition are most problematic among first generation students, many of whom are minority students. Specifically, students who are the first in their family to attend college have a more difficult time staying in school. First-generation students are significantly more likely to drop out of a four-year institution after completing one
year of studies and are less likely to ever attain a bachelor’s degree compared to their peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). The same study reports college educated parents are more equipped to assist their children during the academic process and provide them with an advantage, not only for college acceptance, but also for overall academic success. By comparison, first-generation students are more likely to have the disadvantage of lacking the necessary information for making important decisions regarding the college application process. This includes deciding which college to attend, what major to pursue, and a myriad of other decisions involved in the college process (Pascarella, et al. 2004). Therefore, when trying to increase overall student achievement and retention, it becomes important to examine the characteristics of effective instructors.

Defining the concept of teaching effectiveness continues to be challenging for researchers (Roche & Marsh, 2000; Young & Shaw, 1999). No one dimension, trait, behavior, or classroom dynamic fully captures what it means to be an effective teacher. It has been hypothesized as having such a multidimensional construct by a myriad of researchers (Bush, Svinicki, Kim, & Achacoso, 2006; Chickering & Gamson, 1987) with a variance of measurements, this study will only emphasize content knowledge, and personality characteristics of the teacher and classroom dynamics.

Cahn (1984) found a “predictor of teacher effectiveness to be the extent to which learner’s perceived themselves as being understood by those who tried to teach them” (Gordon, 1988). Additionally, the ability to provide others with the feeling of being understood has been identified as perhaps the main ingredient of "communication competence” (Redmond, 1985), which is an important component of teacher effectiveness.
Further research by Ginsberg (2007), provided more insight into the components of teacher effectiveness. This qualitative study, using interviews and observable data from participants at two public universities, identified underlying communication qualities of effective professors. Key findings include: the most likable professors had humanistic qualities in their communication style, and practiced continuous evaluation to meet student learning outcomes. Likewise, the most ineffective professors did little evaluation and were less likely to exhibit humanistic behavior, overall, a useful article to help further explore the communication tendencies of college faculty. Common to the likeable instructors were their use of immediacy, and specific references to nonverbal immediacy when engaged in interactions with students.

In additional studies, teachers who have been deemed to be exemplary have the following characteristics: they have high expectations of students, are organized, set clear goals and plan their lessons carefully (Hativa, 2000). Another way instructors show their exemplary behavior is by giving students regular feedback regarding their progress in the course. They make course content relevant to students by giving examples and connecting course goals to the expectations and experiences of their students, similar to self-disclosure (Horan, 1991 in Hativa, 2000). Hilgemann & Blodget (1991), further expand on this research showing the importance of instructors treating students as individuals. They do this by challenging them, using a variety of strategies to help create interest, and trying to treat students as individuals during their interactions. Additionally, Hilgemann & Blodget found exemplary teachers enjoy teaching, show enthusiasm for the subject, have excellent command of the language and good delivery, inject humor, and introduce dramatic elements (Hativa, 2000), as well as portraying elements of empathy, understanding, and responsiveness (McCroskey, 1992). Effective instructors make an
attempt to promote students' learning, and actively involve them in the learning process through questions and discussions (Kelly & Kelly, 1982).

Studies by Teven (2001) and Tinto (1987) support the components of effective teaching by professors. These components include remaining accessible, approachable and available through personal interaction with those students in their class. Also researched has been the importance of effective communication on positive teacher-student relationships (Hurt, Chris, & McCroskey, 1978). Many of these traits play an important role in creating relationships between instructors and their students. It becomes important to identify and study such relationships and behaviors because of the impact on student learning and classroom communication climate.

**Instructor-Student Relationships**

Instructor-student relationships are one element of a successful classroom environment. They are an integral part of a student’s experience because they increase student engagement and comfort in the classroom. These relationships are created through the willingness to communicate by both instructor and student. Frymier & Houser (2000) reported on the importance of this dynamic in their research of over 300 undergraduate students in two separate studies. These two studies asked respondents to indicate how important eight communication skills and verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors were to good teaching in general. Communication skills were measured using Burleson and Samter’s (1990) Communication Function Questionnaire (CFQ). The CFQ used 31 items assessing the importance of eight different skills using a 7–point scale ranging from “very important” to “very unimportant.” Immediacy was measured both verbally and nonverbally using Richmond et al’s (1987) nonverbal immediacy scale and Gorham’s (1988) verbal immediacy scale. These items contained
statements such as, “Looks at the class while talking,” “Smiles at individual students in the class” “Addresses students by name,” and “Asks questions or encourages students to talk.” What was discovered through these two studies was the significance of two skills. In study one, referential skill and ego support were perceived by students to be the most important communication skill for good teaching. In study two these two skills were found to be “significant predictors of learning and motivation.” Referential skill refers to the ability of teachers to explain content effectively, while ego support represents the relational aspect of teachers meeting students’ emotional needs. Therefore, this research helps to illustrate the presence of both content and emotion as the breadth and depth of interpersonal relationships between instructor and student.

Another component of the complex instructor-student relationship was studied by Teven & McCroskey (1997), which found student evaluations to be an important role in determining the overall state of the relationship between instructor and student. Additionally, Banfield, Richmond, & McCroskey (2006) found positive teacher-student relationships play an important role in determining the amount of affect given to a student in the classroom. Even student evaluations, instruction and learning are significant in communication interactions among instructors and measuring effectiveness (Teven, 2007; Teven & McCroskey, 1997). This is further supported by Zhuojun (2000) who demonstrates that college students strongly desire the interactions between teacher and students at a personal level. Zhuojun (2000) found that when students seek out a one-on-one relationship with professors outside class, it helps professors understand them better, which ultimately enhances their learning. According to this research, then, developing an interpersonal relationship becomes advantageous to any student wanting to increase their knowledge base and classroom experience. The presence of interpersonal
relationships between students and instructors becomes important in understanding their interactions and behaviors, which is explored in the subsequent section.

**Instructor Behaviors that Facilitate Relationship Development**

The following section reports on specific communicator behavior that can lead to relationship development. Focusing on the areas of both verbal and nonverbal means, there have been numerous studies supporting specific behaviors leading to the development of interpersonal relationships, increasing learning and altering the communication climate in the classroom. They present themselves through nonverbal immediacy, solidarity, care and concern first, followed by self-disclosure.

*Nonverbal immediacy, Solidarity, Care and Concern*

Instructors utilize many methods when trying to create a positive supportive environment in the classroom. The process of creating and maintaining a supportive communication climate occurs through specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors of instructors. By using verbal and nonverbal actions such as: demonstrating care and concern, nonverbal immediacy (nonverbal behaviors that communicate liking), solidarity, and self-disclosure, instructors can create a positive supportive climate. These elements are also seen as being important to overall effective teaching.

The student learning experience was further identified as important to communication research, but with different results by Chesbro & McCroskey (2001). The researchers studied communication style of teachers using an experiment of 192 students at a large mid-Atlantic university with the issue of immediacy (both high and low) being manipulated to determine the
impact of teacher communication style on student learning. Students were randomly placed in one of four experimental conditions and the experiment exposed participants to a series of videos on the same lecture content but different teacher immediacy (both high and low) based on manipulations by the “actor” in the video. The results found are useful because they support the notion that students can indeed report accurately on their own learning. This may prove important in determining the successful components of student success and outcomes. In other words, if students can report accurately on their own learning, how necessary is it to have effective communicators teaching, and how will this affect the communication climate developed between student and instructor. However, a drawback to this study is the artificial setting in which the research was conducted, leading to the conclusion that more research is necessary in the area of communication in teaching and its influence on the communication climate exploring interactions that are not staged or artificial.

Mottet, Martin, & Myers (2004) reported on the importance of verbal actions and instructor support through the expression of “messages of inclusion, appreciation and willingness to communicate.” Their study utilized 149 undergraduates asking them to complete two Likert-type scales designed to measure their motives to communicate and their verbal approach or avoidance preference. The Student Motives to Communicate (SMC) Scale (Martin, et al., 2000), utilized a 30-item measure asking students to rate which type of statement reflected their own reasons for talking to their instructors. The Verbal Approach/Avoidance (VAA) Relational Scale (Mottet & Richmond, 1998), a 19-item instrument, was used to determine the extent to which an individual is perceived to use various verbal approach and avoidance relational strategies. Verbal statements were provided representing possible instructor strategies and students were asked to determine how often instructors used them before, during, and after class. It was found that
students perceived instructors’ verbal communication and expression of support, appreciation and inclusion to be important components of effective instructors.

Further research aimed at studying a supportive college classroom reveals a positive relationship exists between student perceptions of teacher caring and nonverbal immediacy, clarity, student-teacher solidarity, and self-disclosure (Teven & Monte, 2008). Their study, examining 252 student’s perceptions of their teacher’s caring, were positively related to students’ ratings of solidarity with their teachers. This finding also supports the suggestion made that the teacher caring construct emphasizes not only the, “warm and fuzzy aspects of interpersonal relationships, but also the nitty-gritty” (Teven & Monte, 2008). This coincides with previous research demonstrating that caring leads to greater student achievement gains (Civikly, 1992; Sidelinger & McCroskey, 1997) Additionally, Teven & Monte (2008) suggest perceived teacher caring may also advance educational goals and improve student learning.

Nonverbal immediacy, defined as the behavior that communicates approachability and closeness between individuals, has been studied by communication professors looking for correlations or relationships between instructor behavior and student learning and success. Particularly, the components of teacher clarity, immediacy and affective learning were determined to have significant relationships in the college classroom (Sidelinger, 2010; Sidelinger & Chesebro, 2003; Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; McCroskey, 1997; Rodriguez, Plax, & Kearney, 1996; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990; Witt & Wheeless, 2001).

In their 1997 study, Sidelinger & McCroskey found correlation between instructor immediacy and student learning through the amount of teacher clarity. This study, using the methodology developed by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey & Richmond (1986), analyzed 204
undergraduate’s responses as they reported on an instructor they had in the class prior to answering the survey. Students were asked questions based on the following areas: teacher clarity in the classroom, students’ affective learning, teacher evaluation, and perceived nonverbal immediacy. Results were significant in further understanding correlations and/or causations between instructor communication style and student learning. This is also significant since the relationship is negatively correlated, which shows nonverbal immediacy and teacher clarity are components of a supportive communication climate that help determine student success.

Further supporting this research, Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen (2007) found evidence that an instructor’s level of engagement and additional characteristics helped contribute to a students’ sense of belonging in the classroom and a more positive experience. Additionally, Henning (2010) in a survey of 278 students found both teacher credibility and socio-communicative style (SCS) significantly predicted affective learning. The research is meaningful when considering the use of supportive communication in the classroom.

“…. students reported that they judged teachers as more competent if they were able to logically and confidently answer questions or defend beliefs and act as a leader, as well as adapt to the dynamics of the student audience and make changes that help students learn rather than strictly adhere to a preset schedule, teaching method, or policy” (Henning, p. 65).

Along with the SCS, this research also demonstrated students placing emphasis on teacher character and specified how exhibiting responsive behaviors to assist students in learning and offering cognitively flexible behaviors increases teacher effectiveness and affective learning. This study also showed promise in indicating that communicative style is a critical component to
students. This offers a starting point to use communication style and climate as a tool in understanding the link between teacher effectiveness and student learning. Therefore, by showing flexibility in course content and instruction, an instructor increases the potential for supportive communication and ultimately impacts the degree to which a student has success in the class.

Frisby & Martin (2010), in their quantitative study of 232 undergraduates, had participants self-report on their interpersonal relationships in the classroom, as they pertained to instructor self-disclosure. Throughout the study, the variable of instructor rapport was consistently found to be a significant factor of both student learning and student participation; indicating the important role communication practices of a classroom instructor to be, “By developing relationships with their students, instructors can build a positive communication climate” (Frisby & Martin, 2010).

Although Malachowski & Martin (2011) offer a different perspective, when reporting on instructor’s perceptions of teaching behaviors and effectiveness, the results further support the presence of nonverbal immediacy as a necessary component in a supportive communication climate. In this study, instructors who perceived that they exhibited positive teaching behaviors (e.g. nonverbal immediacy, confirmation, and caring) reported more nonverbal student responsiveness in their classroom. This could definitely be the reflection of an instructor’s ability, aimed at eliciting a nonverbal relational response from students, especially when instructors are aware of the importance of nonverbal immediacy. However, with most self-reported survey research, there is the possibility of instructors reporting an increased use of pro-
Combining the focus of nonverbal immediacy, clarity, and active learning is the presence of solidarity (Teven & Monte, 2008). Because “increases in solidarity lead to increases in cognitive learning,” (Nussbaum & Chris, 1981); results of this study indicate that increases in caring also lead to increases in cognitive learning. These findings help support the importance of creating a classroom environment which assists in learning by demonstrating caring and cultivating positive interpersonal relationships. Teven & Monte (2008), further claim there is no upper limit to optimum closeness between instructor and student, but that any high amount of solidarity in these relationships should lead to positive relationship and instructional outcomes. This closeness can be influenced by self-disclosure, although there have been unclear and obscure results linking self-disclosure to perceived caring (Downs, Javidi, and Nussbaum, 1988), and establishing solidarity (Teven & Monte, 2008).

Some of the limitations relating to teacher caring and the Teven and Monte (2008) study stem from the sample population. Approximately 87% of the participants in the study were first-semester college freshmen, therefore it could be understood that teacher caring and attempting to effectively communicate resonated more with this group of students than those in their later years of college. Additionally, it can be difficult for instructors to realistically invest in emotional relationships with such large numbers of students every semester, therefore leading to another reason instructors may limit their attempt at improving their communication effectiveness with students (2008).
Self-Disclosure

Another component central to the study of instructor effectiveness and student learning is the role of instructor self-disclosure and its impact on the communication climate. Instructor self-disclosure, conceptualized as the personal and professional information instructors share about themselves that students are unable to obtain from other sources (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994; Sorensen, 1989), is viewed by students as an appropriate classroom behavior (Klinger-Vartabedian & O’Flaherty, 1989).

Research on self-disclosure has been studied for quite some time, with early studies dating from the 1950’s by Jourard. This topic has been heavily utilized in psychology, specifically in the study of counseling with “Jourard’s Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (JSDQ) having been used throughout the world,” (Katadae, 2008). Although much has been published on the topic, many of the studies are quantitative in nature and are therefore not as significant when trying to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of students from a phenomenological perspective. It is difficult to measure through quantitative means as stated by Katadae, (2008) “Living creatures however, have ambiguity and fuzziness that cannot be measured precisely; thus, a deeper understanding is sought through lived experiences.” Additionally, many of these studies have analyzed self-disclosure based on the experiences of students, therefore eliminating any further development to understand faculty communication practices. To eliminate confusion and since many studies have examined self-disclosure as it pertains to both the student and instructor in the classroom, and for the purpose of understanding student perspectives, this study is interested in instructor self-disclosure only.
Self-disclosure can be divided into a variety of topics ranging from impersonal to very personal. Research has found these topics can cover such impersonal topics as educational experiences (especially in regard to course expectations or course content), as well as more personal issues such as family and home life, or opinions on policies and cultural issues relating to the student population. Another important component of self-disclosure is that it is multi-dimensional, having been divided into three different categories of relevance, valence and amount (Goldstein & Bennassi, 1994; Wambach & Brotherm, 1997; Sorensen, 1989; Chris & Nussbaum, 1981).

The first dimension of self-disclosure is relevance. Relevance relates to whether the disclosive statement relates to course content. Frymier & Shulman (1995) found the relevance of the communication presented in the classroom increased student motivation. For example, when teaching an interpersonal communication course in which the study of gender relationships is taught, if the instructor uses personal examples of relationships with the opposite sex, it can have a positive beneficial impact on student learning. However self-disclosure for the sake of self-disclosing, with no direct connection to the subject matter, was found to have no positive impact on student motivation (Cayanus & Martin, 2002).

The second dimension of self-disclosure is valence or positiveness. Cayanus & Martin (2002) define valence as relating to the perception of self-disclosure, stating, when instructors reveal positive information about themselves, students view them more favorably. However, the inverse is also true, finding negative self-disclosure to be “detrimental to the learning environment” (Cayanus & Martin, p.262). Since Cayanus and Martin have found a significant
link between the relevance and valence of self-disclosure impacting student outcomes, there is still a potential for these two dimensions to effect the learning environment in other areas.

The third dimension of self-disclosure, amount, is also an important dimension in further understanding student perceptions of instructor self-disclosure. Lannutti & Strauman (2006) found no significant evidence that the amount of instructor self-disclosure impacted student evaluations. These findings support earlier research by McCarthy & Schmeck (1982) who also found the amount of instructor self-disclosure was not a significant factor in overall student evaluations.

In more previous research by Hill, Ah Yun & Lindsey (2008), in a quantitative study of 320 undergraduates, the dimensions of relevance and valence were analyzed to determine impact on student motivation, teacher liking and teacher immediacy. Their findings indicate the dimension of valence to be a more important determiner of student motivation and teacher liking. This is in contrast to much of the previous research which supported the notion that relevance was the most important dimension. Furthermore, an additional takeaway from this study provides support for self-disclosure to be used as an instructional tool aiding in student outcomes and learning.

Myers, Brann, & Comm, (2009), shared more recent results in the area of self-disclosure. Studying 67 college students in nine focus groups at a large Mid-Atlantic university, they found that instructors establish credibility by effectively self-disclosing information that is relevant to the students or the course material. The study also found students want instructors to continue this practice, and suggest instructors be aware of the timing of their self-disclosures to be most effective.
Other research has examined the impact of instructor self-disclosure on students’ behavior, learning and perceptions. For example, some controversy has existed regarding the impact of instructor self-disclosure on classroom participation. Goldstein & Benassi (1994) found that increases in instructor self-disclosure were associated with increases in student participation, while Wambach & Brothen (1997) found no significant relationship between these two variables. Sorensen (1989) found the types of self-disclosive statements made influenced perceptions of instructors, while McCarthy & Schmeck (1982) found no significant association between instructor self-disclosure. These conflicting results suggest more research is needed to understand the influence of instructor self-disclosure on student learning and additional outcomes, specifically in the areas of qualitative methodology.

Sorensen (1989) also examined the effect of instructor self-disclosure on student perceptions of the instructor. Sorensen first generated 150 self-disclosive statements and had students rate the likelihood of their instructor making each statement, and in a second study used the self-disclosive statements to generate profiles of good to poor instructors. Sorensen found good teachers were perceived to “engage in more intentional, honest, and positive self-disclosures than poor teachers.” In contrast, good teachers were perceived to engage in significantly less self-disclosure than poor teachers. However this did not support the hypothesis and it was found that Sorensen’s study shares the weaknesses of McCarthy and Schmeck’s (1982) study in that the self-disclosures examined are hypothetical rather than actually experienced within the ongoing context of classroom interactions (Lannutti & Strautman, 2006). The issue with many of the studies is that the actual experiments and observations that were conducted utilized fabricated self-disclosure interactions. This damages the external validity and generalizability of the overall student experiences.
Another explanation for unclear findings regarding self-disclosure was provided by Lannutti and Strautman (2006), suggesting certain types of disclosure may not be acceptable in the college classroom. This once again supports the notion that in order for self-disclosure to be effective and beneficial to serve student learning, it must be relatively impersonal in nature and serve to clarify the course material. This allows the instructor to maintain professional boundaries, while still demonstrating a personal interest in the students’ education.

From the amount of research conducted in artificial situations, to the lack of qualitative studies on the topic, self-disclosure contains many inconsistencies among current research studies. It is also important to understand that although there are many studies claiming the benefit of instructor self-disclosure, this should not be confused with care, concern, nonverbal immediacy, and the like. In other words, much of the research shows it is possible to show concern and empathy while not engaging in self-disclosure, which appears to be a much greater variable in understanding both instructor effectiveness and the instructor-student relationship.

Once the components of care, concern, nonverbal immediacy, solidarity, and self-disclosure are present, it is important to be able to measure them in order to understand their impact on the communication climate and instructor-student relationships. Continuing to be a factor in the overall communication climate of the instructor-student relationship is the idea of supportive and defensive communication. These are effectively understood and measured through examining the actual interactions between participants to determine the amount of supportive or defensive communication patterns present. This is achieved using Gibb categories.
Communication Climate

Teacher-student relationships are defined as interpersonal connections formed at the start of a semester having the ability to strengthen over the length of time in the classroom and/or college environment. These connections are the foundation on which effective classroom communication is built. Communication scholars have long advocated the importance of effective communication on positive teacher-student relationships (Hurt, Chris, & McCroskey, 1978), and they are seen as being one element of effective instructor-student relationships.

The communication climate, like all social aspects of learning environments, is negotiated, maintained, and changed through all modes of communication (verbal, non-verbal, and para-verbal), both explicit and implicit; that is, through what we infer from routine, patterned interactions that take place in a particular environment (Garvin–Doxas & Barker, 2004).

Creating a supportive communication climate is the main goal of successful relationships. Not only does the communication climate focus specifically on the nature of communication within a setting, the college classroom in this case, but it is an important component of effective instruction.

Gibb Categories

Using Gibb categories is one way to characterize the breadth and depth of communication interactions occurring in the college classroom between instructors and students. Jack Gibb (1961) was one of the first scholars to study communication patterns and behaviors. Offering a theory of twelve categories representing emerging patterns from his eight-year study, Gibb developed a category of supportive and defensive communication. Divided into six pairs of opposite communication behaviors, each pair links the defensive behavior to the conceptual
opposite as follows: evaluation versus description; control versus problem orientation; strategy versus spontaneity; neutrality versus empathy; superiority versus equality; certainty versus provisionalism. Through these patterns, Gibb identified specific communication habits that either increased or decreased defensiveness in the participant group. These specific communication habits illustrate typical responses to interactions based on actual word choice and conversational tone. For example, Gibb observed people feel threatened when they perceive they are under attack and therefore respond in a defensive manner, creating a defensive communication climate. Therefore, he offered as a way to decrease the level of defensiveness from occurring, types of responses illustrating a more positive manner to interact with the goal of increasing successful communication among participants. It should be noted that although in Gibb’s original work published in 1961 not a single reference is mentioned, his theory remains a vital element of communication and has been applied across the study of “persuasion, family therapy, education, cultural diversity, and organizational effectiveness” (Forward, Czech, & Lee, 2011).

In one of the earliest studies utilizing Gibb’s categories, Baker (1980) was instrumental in understanding the importance of how both a supportive and a defensive communication climate is formed. His study focused on examining previous research on the topic to try and determine a greater understanding of the causes and effects of these interactions. He found that: “…although defensiveness is a result of perceived threat from difference in others, it affects all phases of communication, thus resulting in total communication deterioration” (1980). Likewise, he found “nonthreatening relationships with others can best be achieved by (a) empathizing or understanding with them as opposed to judging or evaluating them and their comments; (b) treating them as equals, as important and competent persons, as opposed to degrading them and their contributions; and (c) being congruent or genuine in every way” (1980). This is significant
to the study of instructor-student relationships and the communication climate in that even the earliest findings reflect the presence of a supportive communication climate in the classroom and its impact on both student and instructor.

Rosenfeld (1983) in his quantitative study utilizing Classroom Climate questionnaires, (adapted from Hays, 1970), focused on the perception of 83 undergraduate students and also found that both the supportive and defensive classroom climates are independent, in that a class may have a climate that falls under one of the following categories: low supportive/high defensive, high supportive/low defensive, low supportive/low defensive, or high supportive/high defensive, with all of these categories classified by teacher behaviors indicative of more supportive or defensive responses. Rosenfeld, building upon the initial findings of Baker (1980) further states the significance for future studies should be focused on teachers making a better effort to demonstrate supportive behaviors and not defensive ones since results of this study, and the like, could prove beneficial in predicting and controlling classroom interactions.

More recent research has built upon these early studies by Gibb, to express support for a positive communication climate in the classroom. Osterman’s (2000) review of studies researching the impact of sense of belonging, found compelling evidence of students who felt connected to their school communities to be more motivated and to experience more positive academic outcomes. Additionally, Johnson (2009) reported on the connected classroom climate as it relates to overall student learning, which utilized the Connected Classroom Climate Inventory (CCCI) developed by Dwyer, et al. (2004). It is an 18-item scale using Likert-type items to report on interaction measures of students in class. Differing from previous research, Johnson (2009) focuses on student-student interactions. However the findings were consistent with previous research supporting instructor-student interactions, showing the presence of
instructor nonverbal immediacy as well as support for affective learning as crucial components to a successful learning experience.

One impact of using the Gibb categories to interpret the communication climate is the benefit in understanding the use of feedback interventions (FIs), which are emotionally charged interactions with important identity implications for students. Feedback is central to the interactions between instructors and students and although it is a vital part of the learning process and necessary in every teacher-student relationship, it can greatly alter perception of teachers from a student standpoint. Even when FIs are combined with positive comments about a student’s work, the message being heard is that students did not do as well as they could or should have (Trees, Kerssen-Griep, & Hess 2009). Trees, Kerssen-Griep, & Hess (2009), further studied the impact of FIs as they relate to students’ face needs. Face refers to the desired self-image individuals present in interaction with others; facework describes the communication strategies people use in interaction to “sustain or restore each other’s preferred social identities” (Goffman, 1967). Trees, et al. (2009) tested whether receiving appropriate face support during FIs would enhance the fairness and efficacy students perceived in the FIs, “decrease their defensiveness about the suggested corrections, and elevate their judgments about their teachers’ credibility as feedback providers” (2009). The study of FIs and facework is important when studying teacher-student relationships because how students feel about their teachers and interactions influences the manner in which students’ cognitive learning occurs. Therefore, instructor-student relationships are the foundation of the communication climate, instructor-student interactions and teacher effectiveness.
One of these studies relating to education was conducted by Forward, Czech & Lee, (2011) in which participants were randomly selected faculty members, teaching at institutions affiliated with the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC). There were a total of 202 participants selected across a variety of disciplines, all full-time faculty members, asked to evaluate their department chair’s communication behaviors. The instrument used was The Communication Climate Inventory (Hays, 1970) which used Gibb’s (1961) 12 factors of supportive and defensive communication behaviors, presented to participants in the form of thirty-six questions using a Likert-type format scaled from 1-5. The findings provide significant rationale for further study using Gibbs work, since the empirical evidence found in this study did not seem to support 12 “discrete communication behaviors,” (Forward, Czech & Lee, 2011). The authors suggest instead of trying to understand supportive and defensive communication by trying to identify one specific behavior, a more effective way of measuring these types of behaviors would be through using a continuum, instead of identifying with either a supportive behavior or its defensive counterpart.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

This chapter provides a guideline and overview of the methodology to be utilized in this study. The reasoning and analysis of the qualitative phenomenology is explained to further understand the approach and its impact on the findings.

Conducting exploratory research on student perceptions of the communication process in the undergraduate college classroom was the focus of this study. Specifically, the interpersonal relationships developed between instructor and students were examined to more deeply understand instructor communication and its impact on the communication climate. Research questions explored included the following:

1. How do undergraduate students describe supportive and defensive instructor communication styles in the college classroom?
2. How do students perceive impacts on classroom climate by faculty members’ communication behaviors?

To address the goals of the study, this chapter explains the overall design including the site and population, research design and rationale, data collection and analysis activities. The chapter also highlights methodological issues, and associated ethical considerations.
Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how student perceptions of instructor communication behaviors in undergraduate college classrooms influence the communication climate. The researcher was seeking to find and ultimately understand the interactions between undergraduate students and their instructors as they occur in the college classroom. Since the majority of research focusing on communication interactions in the college classroom is quantitative in nature, the researcher deemed it necessary to find out more about the experiences of the chosen population. Through this qualitative inquiry, which Creswell (2008), describes as “an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (p. 213), it is hoped the researcher will hear the voices of multiple realities and “lived experiences” (Van Manen, 2007) of the participants. It is within the details of the re-told experiences that the descriptive and emotional stories were analyzed to better understand the population. According to Merriam (2009) a phenomenological approach is best suited to determine the basic essence of an experience, additionally, it is “…well suited to affective, emotional and often intense human experiences” (p. 24), making the phenomenological approach the most appropriate for this study.

To get at the basic underlying structure of the meaning of the experience, in-depth qualitative interviews were the primary source of data collection. The personal interview is commonly used for data collection in qualitative research. According to Restine (1999), using interviews is a way a researcher can enter into another’s perspectives to understand the manner in which people make sense of their world. Through interviews, a researcher can extend his or her intellectual and emotional reach across time, class, race, gender, and geographical divisions (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The words of interviewees gave a picture of the lived classroom.
experiences, demonstrating how the students make sense of their communication interactions with college instructors.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method in this research. The interviews conducted in this study were designed as semi-structured interviews rather than structured interviews. In the semi-structured interview, the interviewer asks predefined questions but provides additional time for the interviewee to talk.

The thick, rich data collected through this phenomenological approach was analyzed to determine the perception of students’ experiences in regards to communication interactions in the college classroom.

**Site & Population**

*Population Description*

The target population for the study is a sample of eight undergraduate students at a medium size comprehensive four-year university in northern California. Students all share the trait of being undergraduates in the department of communication studies at the university. No further ethnicity, age, gender, or other demographic information is important to differentiate or identify at this time. Being of more concern are the experiences these students share, having taken college classes for a minimum of two years, placing them in the class standing of junior or senior. Although the demographics are not coveted as specific variables of analysis, they could prove of interest during the coding process, specifically first generation college students and the difference between the genders. Therefore, the demographic information was noted but not utilized as a precursor to determine population sample. Students from a local four-year institution were selected because of the amount of previous research utilizing instructor communication at the university level. For the purpose of comparison and analysis, the researcher wanted to study a
similar population in a similar environment. Although the selected undergraduate students were communication majors, it was not the intent of the research to only identify interactions and behaviors of instructors within the communication discipline. The primary concern was to interview students who were in their junior or senior year and who had at least two years of college on which to reflect for the interviewing process. Students were selected from a database of the researcher’s current and previous students, based on their willingness to share their experiences focusing on their perceptions of the communication practices of previous and current instructors. A number of both female and male students were selected for the interview process. Not only do perceptions of interactions in the classroom vary among students, the difference between the sexes were also important to study.

**Site Description**

The chosen institution is a medium-sized university with over 25,000 students. The university is the only Sacramento area comprehensive university. The diverse population of the university includes over 60% White and Asian, and the remaining students fall under: 16% Latino, 14% other, and 7% African American. The population is skewed more heavily to females, having 58% female students and 42% male students.

**Site Access**

Access to the site was gained through the relationships and employment history the researcher has with the institution. It was chosen not only because of ease of access but also because of the diverse population from which to draw and interview. Students chosen for the research process were selected based on availability from the communication major and relationships with the primary researcher. They were contacted based on their willingness to participate and the requirement that participants be in their junior or senior year of college.
Research Methods

In this case, the participants had varied experiences and attitudes toward their college instructors and the researcher wanted these detailed depictions of their experiences. A semi-structured interview, rather than a structured interview, was considered best for this research.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the phenomenological approach in mind focusing specifically on horizontalization. Horizontalization, is referred to by Moustakas (1994) as the process of explicating the phenomenon, by recognizing and describing phenomenon and granting equal value to every perception. Horizontalization, as a type of phenomenological research, will be utilized as another way to ensure the researcher is fully engaged in the research process and using bracketing in an epoche. In an epoche, the everyday judgments, understandings, and knowings are set aside with the hope that the product of this phenomenological study accurately describes the structure of the experience being studied.

Description of Each Method Used

The following resources were utilized in conducting this phenomenological research study:

- Qualitative interviews
- Field notes
- Artifacts

Qualitative interviews
Instrument description. The interviews began with a set of open ended semi-structured questions suitable to be answered by all participants. The questions were drafted through combining knowledge gathered from the literature review process and the researcher’s own interest in understanding and searching for “gaps” in the current research. Once the questions were written and reviewed, two pilot interviews were conducted. At the close of each interview
session, participants had the opportunity to express any further descriptions and comments through an open-ended question.

**Participant selection.** Student participants were chosen based on their year in school and willingness to answer questions regarding communication experiences in the college classroom. They were selected at random from a group of junior and senior communication majors who were contacted by the researcher.

**Identification and invitation.** The chosen participants were contacted personally (via phone, email, or face-to-face) and asked to schedule a time to meet for an hour long interview. The interviews were conducted at a time as to not inconvenience the participant, after which each participant received a formal thank you, with a copy of the report available at their request.

**Data collection.** Data was collected using a digital recording device from which a transcription of the conversation was made. In addition, the interviewer took brief notes to document any specific verbal or non-verbal cues from which to add further dimension to the interview.

**Field notes**

**Instrument description.** During the qualitative interviews, the researcher recorded specific nonverbal behaviors of the interviewees. Notes were made specifically to help further illustrate and understand the verbal component of each message/response. These additional notes provided a richer understanding of the interview.

**Participant selection.** The field notes were detailed and recorded for both the obvious and subtle impact any additional cues may have on the overall interaction and experience as told by the interviewees during this process.
Identification and invitation. Participants were briefed prior to the start of the interview so they had full understanding of the field notes process, as to not concern them during the auditory interview.

Data collection. Data was collected in writing in a field notebook. Additional commentary, including any visual or environmental cues, was added to enhance the dimension of the overall experience.

Artifacts

Instrument description. Artifacts that were reviewed included course syllabi demonstrating the written communication impacting the interpersonal relationship and communication climate.

Participant selection. Artifacts were chosen based on their relevance and accessibility.

Identification and invitation. Items for review were identified through interactions with the participants once the initial interviews had been conducted.

Data collection. Documents were reviewed and content was noted appropriately in the field notebook.

Before the data was analyzed, the researcher transcribed all interviews and notes. This process of transcribing ensured the researcher was well acquainted with the data. The researcher created Microsoft Word files for the interviews and journal entries.

Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher used the meaning of analysis context as the unit of analysis for coding. The data was coded for meaning and not just within the context of a specific paragraph or sentence.
Stages of Data Collection

Data was collected by the primary researcher through the in-depth interviews of seven undergraduate students in the communication major. The research was collected during the beginning of 2013 at the start of the Spring semester. Interviews began on April 1 and continued through April 31.

Figure 1: Research Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Research Timeline</th>
<th>Proposed Date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral committee proposal review and approval</td>
<td>March 15, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB Certification (Drexel University and CSUS)</td>
<td>March 30, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research begins</td>
<td>April 1, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant recruitment</td>
<td>April 1, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of Interview Questions</td>
<td>April 2, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pilot Interview</td>
<td>April 5, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revise Interview Questions as needed</td>
<td>April 8, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct Qualitative Interviews</td>
<td>April 30, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin Coding</td>
<td>May 30, 2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>Begin Transcription</td>
<td>August 20, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>August 20, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Chapters 4 and 5 of the dissertation</td>
<td>January 5, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertation Committee Review</td>
<td>February 30, 2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethical Considerations

Since the interviews focused on personal interactions and experiences, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought from Drexel University as well as California State University Sacramento. This approval ensures protection of the research subjects and the confidentiality of their responses. Once IRB was approved, the researcher was able to move forward with the process of informed consent. Each of the selected participants was given and
asked to sign an informed consent protocol prior to the interview process reminding them of the research process and their rights as a participant. They were also reminded that if at any point during the research process they were uncomfortable, they were free to leave the interview process. The researcher also discussed the interview agenda and the use of a recording device to ensure accuracy.

Although there are no other known or anticipated ethical considerations surrounding the research, the following ethical guidelines were put into practice for the research study:

1. The dignity and wellbeing of students will be protected at all times.

2. The research data will remain confidential throughout the study and the researcher will only identify participants through the use of pseudonym.
Chapter 4: Findings, Results, and Interpretations

Introduction

This chapter explains the findings of the study while using researcher interpretation to describe the results, based on concepts from the literature review. All findings, where applicable, are taken from participant interviews, based on their personal experiences and featuring thick, rich descriptions. Pseudonyms of participants are used, with little additional identifying information provided. The chapter closes with a summary of the findings, results, and interpretations.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how student perceptions of instructor communication behaviors in undergraduate college classrooms influence the communication climate. The majority of existing research, focusing on communication interactions between undergraduate students and instructors in the college classroom, is quantitative in nature. While this provides insight into the frequency and effects of specific defensive and supportive communication patterns, missing are the voices of the students to further understand their perceptions of their relationships with faculty. It is the researcher’s objective to explore phenomena further utilizing the following research questions: How do students describe the positive and negative elements of classroom climates? What faculty behaviors do students perceive as contributing positively or negatively to classroom climate?

All eight students interviewed were seniors in the department of communication studies. They all shared the commonality of the researcher having been their professor the previous year. Other similarities between the participants were the specific courses they had taken. Although
their subject area varied, they had all taken common core courses in communication, including: public speaking, interpersonal communication, media communication, critical analysis of messages, and introduction to communication research methods. This is important in understanding their interpretations of interactions with faculty. During the interviews and while conducting coding, it became apparent the lens through which these students were responding to the questions and reflecting on their previous classroom experience was one heavily skewed by being a communication major.

Five males and three females participated in the interviews, and all had work experience with combinations of full time and part time employment. The first participant, Tanner, was a student in his early twenties who worked to help support his family while attending school full time. His demeanor was shy and reserved in class, but became more eager to speak in an interpersonal setting. Chris worked full time at a large multinational organization in addition to attending school. He was very outgoing and goal oriented. Chris was unafraid to speak his mind and often spoke up to insure his needs/goals were met. Nick, a student in his early twenties, had a full time job working in customer service at a large organization. He was aware of the many frustrations from working in a position not requiring a college degree and therefore had multiple internships to start the networking process to gain a job in a field of interest upon graduating.

Brynn, the first of the female students to be interviewed, was a previous full time employee who had recently been laid off. A student in her early twenties, she was eager to understand the requisite skills necessary to land her a position in the communication field upon graduating. Brynn was a high achiever rarely earning lower than an A in any class. Sara was the first in her family to attend college and was also in her early twenties. She lived at home and worked part-time throughout college. The last female participant, Diane, returned to school after
a successful career in sales, deciding it was time to obtain a degree in communication. Her sixty plus years of perspective varied greatly from that of her younger peers. She didn’t work during her college years so her focus was on her studies, but her goal was not to gain employment in the communication field after graduation. It was merely for the satisfaction of completing her degree. The last student interviewed was Matt. He was in his late twenties and had taken a few years off of college. He worked full-time as a self-made entrepreneur and was looking forward to getting his degree, although was unsure of how he would use it after graduation. Matt was very modest, shy in his interactions with his peers and professors in the classroom.

Study participants provided examples of the importance of communication traits influencing the environment in the undergraduate classroom. There was emphasis placed on the reflection of instructor nonverbal and verbal behaviors, which were evidenced by the number of references students used to describe their professors.

**Findings**

In phenomenological research, unifying phenomena are identified through gathering the descriptions of individuals’ lived experiences and comparing them for common themes (Creswell, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing seven undergraduate students to share their lived experiences over the course of their college career. Moustakas (1994) identifies phenomenology as a method to allow individuals to go back to experiences and determine meaning. Upon review of the raw transcription data, field notes and artifacts, through the coding process, detailed descriptions were provided of what a positive and negative communication climate look like in the undergraduate college classroom. Also included in the findings were specific behaviors present during both the positive and negative communication
interactions. The positive communication climate demonstrated instructor empathy, equality and description (examples of supportive communication as stated by Gibb, 1961); and a negative communication climate showed the defensive instructor communication consisting of neutrality, evaluation and superiority (examples of defensive communication as stated by Gibb, 1961). Additionally, class artifacts, such as syllabi and class assignments reflecting the presence of verbal communication were provided to the researcher and analyzed. In keeping with the overall purpose of the research, there were two additional themes that emerged: factors influencing supportive communication behaviors of instructor interaction in the classroom, and factors influencing defensive communication behaviors.

Specific behaviors demonstrated by the instructors in these two classroom environments were broken down into categories. Figure 2 provides an outline of communication traits influencing a classroom communication climate, as well as the supportive and defensive behaviors demonstrated in the classroom leading to a more positive or negative perspective by the student.
Students described the formation of a communication climate in the classroom involving a combination of communication traits reflecting both nonverbal and verbal behavior and leading to the formation of either a supportive or defensive communication climate. Students expressed these communication traits ranging from a variety of nonverbal traits, (eye contact, vocalics, body language) and verbal traits (greeting students, expressing empathy, showing care), which were then interpreted by students to reflect a positive (supportive) or negative (defensive) classroom communication climate.

The first theme arising through the analysis of data was the presence of communication demonstrated by instructor’s nonverbal and verbal communication. It was significant enough to warrant two separate subsections identifying the traits through spoken words and accompanying body language and vocalics. The next theme identified as significant to students was the specific
supportive behaviors demonstrated by instructors through their use of guidance, soft skills and informal meetings. Finally, defensive behaviors, as identified by students, were demonstrated by instructor’s use of perceived power, the number of impacted classes at the university, and a student’s prior experience with an instructor.

**Communication Traits**

To begin, communication traits leading to a supportive or defensive communication climate were foremost in the mind of participants throughout the interview process. This stemmed from the nature of the questions asked, as well as the researcher having taught participants in previous communication courses.

Initially, participants exemplified communication traits under both areas of nonverbal and verbal behaviors, as expressed by instructors, focusing first on initial encounters, and continuing throughout the entire class session.

**Nonverbal Behaviors**

Nonverbal behaviors incorporate an array of specific instructor communication traits that can be interpreted by students in the classroom. It is significant in that these communication traits lead to a supportive or defensive communication climate in the classroom. Nonverbal behaviors found in the research included facial expressions, eye contact, proximity (space), and kinesics (body language). The subthemes of friendliness and approachability as demonstrated through an instructor’s communication were so predominant in the research they appear both under the nonverbal and verbal behavior sections in the following.
**Friendliness.** The primary communication attribute mentioned among the majority of participants was the notion of an instructor’s mood upon entering the classroom, and whether the mood could be interpreted as a friendly one, often perceived by students as whether an instructor has a smile on his/her face when walking into a room. This was stated by participants as having the most impact on the overall communication climate, specifically when it came to reflecting a positive one. As Tanner stated, with a quickened rate and a smile when thinking about the positive nonverbal attributes of one professor:

There was a professor in a communication class I took that was positive…he had a positive personal communication with me since he always comes in in a real happy mood. He walks in with a really big smile, looking at us and asking questions right away. (Tanner)

Diane also echoed the importance of nonverbal facial expression, being very matter-of-fact when confronted with the question of how important instructor interactions with their students really are. As a successful leader in a large organization until her retirement, Diane reflected on the importance of how nonverbal messages can be interpreted by customers, employees, and the public. Specifically relating the relationship between an instructor and student to that of a sales associate and a customer, Diane pointed out why an instructor’s nonverbal communication continues to be vital in the college classroom:

When I was working with a customer or client I had to pay attention to my nonverbal behaviors. It’s important to smile and acknowledge another person you are communicating with. When a professor looks at you, it’s the same way, we are the customer and it’s really nice. (Diane)

Chris’s interpretation of nonverbal behaviors, as it pertained to friendliness, was more pragmatic. He responded very straightforward about how minor the presence of instructor eye
contact and smiling were for his experience in the college classroom, stating “I don’t care about how nice or friendly an instructor is, I want consistency.” Although no other responses supported the theme of consistency, participants shared the importance of a simple smile, body language and eye contact. Not only were they interpreted by participants as reflecting friendliness, but approachability as well.

**Approachability.** While seven out of eight students shared their desire of instructors to reflect an approachable mannerism, it wasn’t as easy to identify what this looked like to participants. One student remarked on this aspect as looking like the following:

> Once he enters the classroom, he has a really big smile and he walks in all cheerfully, then we started doing an activity that was funny so we started laughing and the professor was laughing. This became a fun learning environment and activity for us. (Tanner)

> From this description Tanner recalls the relaxing climate initiated by this professor for the purpose of setting students at ease, “He showed us we could have fun and in doing so we felt comfortable talking and participating.”

> While others mentioned the idea of how important it is for students to feel it is easy to approach an instructor, it was hard to pinpoint the nonverbal behaviors, demonstrating this. Brynn said it was when an instructor “did not smile at us during class, causing us to feel very intimidated.” She then looked away and thought for a moment to find additional examples reflecting approachability and when she couldn’t, proceeded she reiterated her first thought, “its important, you know?”

> Chris was more unfazed by this question due to the fact, in his words, of “working as an employee for a large organization for many years and understanding you don’t always get the
nonverbal feedback you want.” He was quick to relate this experience as an employee to that of a student and felt his expectations of approachability and nonverbal behavior from an instructor was undoubtedly different from many college students. In fact, he was aware that there was often a lack of nonverbal expression or smiling during interactions with professors, and he did not interpret it as that significant, he seemed hardly bothered by it. His philosophy was not to “take it personally” but to continue to “give them (instructors) what they want.” He summed it up in this way:

I learned a long time ago, having different instructors is like having a number of different bosses. You have to figure out what they expect from you and how to communicate with them to be successful in college. (Chris)

Moving on to the verbal behaviors demonstrated by instructors, participants were also able to pinpoint and reflect on the specific language used during interactions, not only in the classroom but around campus as well. Verbal behaviors were found occurring in more categories as students were able to provide more specific examples of instructor language used. These were divided into the subtopics of friendliness, approachability, flexibility, and respect.

**Verbal Behaviors**

Instructor communication traits were identified through students’ interpretation of verbal words/cues but not the tone in which the words were stated. The subthemes of friendliness and approachability again arose as being significant communication traits but also included flexibility and respect.

**Friendliness.** Nick shared the importance of recognition and attention given to him by a particular professor,
There was a communication class and that teacher, she was very friendly, always asking for input from us students. She let the class set the pace for the semester based on how comfortable we were with each topic for each chapter and unit. (Nick)

Additional participants mentioned these friendly traits as being a professor who is very upbeat, happy and always greeting people (Brynn, Diane). The majority of students recalled the friendliness as occurring right from the beginning of an instructor interaction. When asked about traits to creating a positive climate, Brynn confidently stated the following:

I think being happy is one of them if you have that kind of grumpy mood, you’re almost intimidated to approach them about anything because you fear the professor will feel like you’re wasting their time and they don’t want to hear what you have to say. (Brynn)

One of the simplest traits in developing a positive communication climate came from instructor greetings and was as simple as saying “hi” to students. Not only when entering a classroom, but when seeing students around campus as well. As Sara stated, “I would see my professor around and he would say my name, and he would say hi to me… I thought this was really cool.” This idea of a simple verbal greeting was also echoed by another female:

Having an instructor look at you, acknowledge you, just even say hi when they pass you in the hall; that was really nice. It makes you feel like it’s kind of like you matter that they at least recognize your face. (Diane)

The male participants seemed less impacted by a verbal greeting, although they noticed the nonverbal component as being important, with none of them recalling a situation in which instructor language reflected friendliness. As Tanner recalled in regards to a personal greeting in a very matter-of-fact tone, “I just want a professor to enter in a happy mood, I don’t want to see negative attitudes coming from professors.”
Approachability. Another important verbal factor brought up among participants was how approachable their professors were. This was reflected in their interaction with students from the start of the semester. Students felt comfortable by their professors who, early in the semester, demonstrated an approachable verbal mannerism which lead to a more positive feeling about their learning environments and instructors. As one full time employee and student was aware:

I would say basically how approachable they are and how they talk to you leads to a supportive communication climate. Both (my) professors treated us as adults, and they got what made the communication so positive was that you can have conversations, and it’s almost like having an open dialogue where we respected each other equally and there was no intimidation by this person /this professor. In both (positive) classes there were a lot of projects and both professors would go around and listen to our group meetings and offer some sort of guidance which lead to, for the most part, a very good communication between the student and also with the professor, so that communication became very positive in both of those areas.(Nick)

Although this type of approachability included a bit of nonverbal behaviors, with the instructor physically walking around the room to guide and listen to group dynamics and interactions, the important accompanying verbal message was most influential. The mere presence of instructor dialogue lead to student interpretation of a supportive communication climate. Additionally, with instructors demonstrating their approachability through verbal expression, students felt a level of care and concern they enjoyed. Nick, Sara and Brynn further expressed the importance of instructor initiated conversation and greeting as influencing the communication climate. They want instructors to be more open to students instead of just immediately giving them objective assignments; they want professors to develop some sort of relationship with students, such as
opening the floor to students. Doing so, according to Tanner, will help make students want to “come and talk to the professor personally about anything, developing some sort of relationship with the student.”

The description of accessibility fell under the same category as approachability, according to students and was of paramount importance to these students. As Nick pointed out, when instructors tell their students they will be available it reflects their verbal behaviors positively. “Accessibility, the way they make themselves available five minutes before and five minutes after class …also during office hours is really big.”

**Flexibility.** Flexibility was sought after by students seeking a supportive communication climate as well. Students expressed the desire to have rules and consistency in order to understand course objectives and to figure out what instructors wanted, feeling these rules were important in the design of the course but that instruction and interaction outside the classroom should be more flexible. Nick openly expressed his experiences about working full time while being a full time student. He often recalled feeling bothered about professors not willing to allow flexibility when turning in assignments or having to miss class. This was primarily with students, such as himself, working full time in addition to carrying a full load at school.

Flexibility is huge too…you know we have a life outside of school, and if you are open with a professor and you give them advanced warning, you let them know what’s going on, flexibility is huge, a lot of times teachers can be very flexible, but some still are not (Nick).

Remaining flexible to the pace of a given class is also important in terms of the overall communication climate. Sara expressed this trait as being important stating “I felt like it was a positive communication environment, because he always took our feedback and always took into
consideration what we were thinking or how we felt.” Students able to recall all of these nonverbal and verbal behaviors, were ultimately reflecting on the amount of respect demonstrated by their instructors through primarily verbal means.

**Respect.** Respecting students was mentioned by many participants and manifested itself by instructors remaining friendly, approachable and flexible, as previously mentioned, but with an additional component of open dialogue, one that allows the students to freely converse with instructors on topics pertaining both to the class assignments as well as personal opinions and experiences. Nick, having worked full time during his college years in a large corporation with a focus on employee training and open dialogue with managers, was able to provide a very succinct example of this respect.

What made the communication so positive was that you can have conversations and it is almost like having an open dialogue where we respected each other equally and there was no intimidation by this person, this professor (Nick).

Brynn’s experience of respect, while not reflecting a work history, was one of practical classroom interactions. She was irritated in her response when reflecting on the importance of being shown respect during instructor-student interactions. “During class discussion, when they ask for your opinion and you give it to them, they don’t shoot you down” (Brynn). This is what respect looks like for a female willing to speak up often in class. This experience was also shared by female respondents who stated a subtle element of respect, not necessarily an explicit one, of every interaction seemingly reflected a better liked instructor.

Specific communication traits of friendliness, approachability, flexibility and respect manifested through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors were the most significant to students as impacting the overall communication climate. While these demonstrated specific communication
behaviors of instructors, the next theme focuses on specific supportive attributes as demonstrated by instructors utilizing the Gibb (1961) categories of supportive communication as well as any other additional attributes as identified by participants.

**Supportive Communication Attributes (Guidance, Equality, Informal Meetings)**

Respondents were asked to recall specific instances when instructors provided empathy, equality and description reflecting supportive communication according to Gibb (1961). The responses were definite and plentiful with a number of themes arising from them. The supportive component of instructor communication was seen as occurring in specific contexts, as specific times in the classroom as well as outside normal class hours and in accordance with the nature of intentional guidance. Students also chose to bring up the difference between tenured and non-tenured faculty and how this impacts communication between students and instructors. This was very telling due to the fact that there were no questions even asking students to respond about the differences between tenured and non-tenured faculty. Participants chose to focus on pointing out the positive communication demonstrated by the non-tenured instructors.

…we kind of talked in class, that they were not tenured, and I think that was a huge part to do with it, as I have found that tenure teachers do not care about their students. At least that’s how it comes off. They are just there to collect their paycheck…Non-tenured teachers really take the time out to help students after class, during class, during their office hours and stuff like that (Brynn).

Nick emphasized the most positive class he experienced was because the teacher was a “part-time instructor,” because she was a former bank executive she brought a lot of “real-world experience” which provided the class and the students with a lot more confidence in asking her for help about their future career decisions. Overall, participants were eager to reflect on their
interactions with “part-time faculty” with much more appreciation and affection. Many stated their affinity for them, preferring to take future classes specifically because these part-time instructors showed more willingness to offer guidance.

**Guidance.** When asked about the importance of an instructor’s ability to provide empathy, students agreed it was a vital component to the guidance process. Respondents recalled their professor’s roles as involving more than just teaching. Responses given reflected the multiple identities of college instructors. Four of the respondents shared personal examples of how they were affected by an instructor’s ability to provide empathy and show concern throughout the semester. Since most participants had a personal experience affecting them at one point in their college career, they used it an example to show just how important the element of guidance can be to a college student. As Tanner remembered one instructor fondly, “She cared about me, and knew about the problems I was having during the semester.” Chris also shared, for me personally, my grandfather passed away and I had to leave for his funeral and all four of my classes, they were very understanding. Nobody made me feel bad.” (Chris) Students also expressed the number of instructors who understood they all had other important commitments outside the classroom, namely family and work, as being important elements of showing understanding.

This element of guidance is not unique male or female students. Brynn shared a specific example of a professor offering guidance without her even asking for help. She reflected on it with hesitancy in her voice:

This one semester, a professor pulled me aside and was kind of concerned about me and noticed I wasn’t myself. And I was like, OK, I have some things to work on myself - and
she didn’t necessarily tell me that, but it made me think… like wow, this really shows that she cares (Brynn).

**Equality** Supportive elements were reflected by students in an instructor’s use of their ability to treat all students as equals. Students were specifically asked to comment on the presence of instructor equality, both in how they treat students and how they perceive their relationship with their students. Respondents all noted the presence of instructor’s behaviors and interactions pertaining to the presence of equality as indicators of a positive place to learn. “Instructors that are real and treat students like any other person are very effective, and many people appreciate this type of teaching style” (Chris). Students also appreciated when instructors treated them as they would any colleague or adult.

I like the way you showed us that you were the same as us, by sitting with us, and immersing yourself in us. It makes our relationship more level while still having that respect for you. (Sara)

Description reflects a more positive response to providing student feedback than evaluation or judgment. When students explain interactions with their professors involving receiving feedback or grades on assignments, either a positive neutral description of the students work would be expressed by the instructor, or a more negative evaluation would occur. While it was difficult for students to remember many of these examples, two respondents gave specifics as to how “supportive” a professor was when providing feedback on assignments. Matt recalled a particular assignment he did very poorly on.

I did really bad on an assignment and he explained what I did wrong and asked if I needed additional help. He was open to talk to me about my problems with the paper, and wrote specific problems I had on the paper and when I was reading it, I could see he was
right. So I felt that he was descriptive, instead of judgmental on my essay and I felt really good. (Matt)

Chris was also very open when reflecting on instructor feedback, as he stated with a sigh, “Honestly I don’t feel like I’m judged too often. I’m a pretty open book I am what you see, and I understand many of the grades I receive.”

Students expressed examples in both areas of equality and description where these supportive behaviors helped create a positive communication climate. They also found the presence of soft skills to be of importance.

**Soft Skills** Participants next reflected on the amount of soft skills utilized in their interactions with instructors. Since the participants were all communication students, their use of the term “soft skills” was used to mean the necessary verbal and nonverbal communication skills to ensure a competent communication exchange occurs. These soft skills were recognized by students as having the ability and willingness to ensure their communication was effective in their dealings with students. Again, it was important to note the topic of tenure which again came up as a reason behind these skills.

I like how professors are more open to students instead of just straight up giving them objective assignments. I want them to develop some sort of relationship with students… like opening the floor to students for discussion, like, if you have any questions, he (my instructor) wanted you to come talk to him personally about anything, developing some sort of a relationship. (Tanner)

Tanner noted this particular instructor was non tenured and wished other tenured faculty would follow suit and learn from his example of taking the time to model the necessary soft skills leading supportive interactions in the classroom.
I’ve had other professors… I had a professor in history this semester that was, there was something about his demeanor that was very disarming and he was just a regular human being, and he also did a very good job with communicating this to the students. (Chris)

While soft skills were important to supportive communication climates, they were only part of the equation, as mentioned by students, an instructor’s ability to meet with them outside of normal class time was equally important.

**Informal Meetings** The final area of supportive communication was that of informal meetings and interactions with instructors. These meetings were viewed as being crucial to helping students feel comfortable asking questions of their professor as well as to engage in more interpersonal communication which allowed an opportunity for mutual understanding and liking.

As one participant stated:

> One of my professors, without tenure, really takes the time out to help students after class, during class, during their office hours and stuff like that… and they just seem genuinely there to help people - which is the biggest thing for me. (Brynn)

Matt also responded positively to the importance of spending time with a professor outside of the classroom. During a particularly tough semester, he smiled when reflecting on a significant relationship with one professor.

> You get to know so much more about a professor when visiting them during office hours. I was able to become a TA for one of my professors and because of that, it was easier to get letters of recommendation, learn about career choices and just network in my chosen field. (Matt)

Tanner also mentioned the importance of establishing relationships outside the classroom.
One time I wanted to meet with a professor during her office hours and she invited me to have lunch with her. This was nice. It really felt like she cared about me and made it easier for me to talk to her about class and stuff. (Tanner)

Even a simple gesture of a greeting in the hallway or talking briefly before or after class was an integral component to a supportive communication climate, as mentioned by both Diane and Sara. Just as supportive communication attributes helped form a positive climate, the defensive communication attributes were also present, creating a negative communication climate.

**Defensive Communication Attributes**

Defensive communication attributes tended to manifest themselves not directly in regards to the specific Gibb category, but to the overall feeling and experience participants have in the classroom. Students identified these defensive communication attributes (neutrality, superiority and evaluation) as being identified through the presence of instructor power, instructor tone, and prior experience with a professor.

**Instructor Power**

Instructor power was immediately spoken of by participants in a negative manner. When asked to reference specific instances of defensive communication attributes, students were able to provide examples of neutrality, superiority and evaluation.

**Neutrality.** Students’ feelings were mixed when asked about the importance of instructors remaining more neutral in the interactions with them. “I think consistency is important, and if that comes off as being more neutral, then that’s ok” (Chris). Students more affected by the neutral responses appeared among the younger respondents. “I personally felt like
with that professor, I didn’t feel comfortable going and talking to him about my problems because he didn’t seem open to me” (Tanner). The other respondents couldn’t give specific examples of their professors using more of a neutral approach when engaged in specific interactions. What was surprising was the number of students who were able to provide examples of empathy (the supportive counterpart). All respondents provided at least one example of a time when a professor showed empathy as opposed to just two who gave support for a professor demonstrating neutrality.

Superiority. The most common defensive communication behaviors mentioned focused on superior demeanors and statements made by professors. Examples of this type of communication came up during multiple questions of the interview process, even though not all questions were designed specifically to measure superiority. Because of the length and number of responses surrounding this type of interaction, it is apparent to students the amount of superiority that exists [whether intentional or not]. This was also noted by students as existing in classes taught by tenured professors. Students remarked that superiority was expressed by instructors often from their first interaction, noting the number of professors emphasizing the correct way to refer to them, “you may call me Dr., not professor.” (Diane) Additionally, this negative trait was expressed when instructors were teaching, though not necessarily the course content. One tenured professor referenced in particular was often remarking about her academic success and those of her graduate students. The response from students, however, was not positive. “She would always push for higher education and made reference to her academic career and references to her grad students…it made the classroom very intense for that hour and fifteen minutes” (Nick).
Tanner described his experience with one tenured professor including an element of superiority quite bitterly, saying, “the way he talked to us, the way he used bigger vocabulary that we couldn’t really understand was frustrating.” The same sentiment, of a slightly different nature, as described by Brynn, was from tenured professors, “they talk down to you when you speak up in discussion and they would shoot you down, because it’s not exactly what they wanted to hear.” All students showed frustration from the amount of superiority expressed by professors. One, in particular, mentioned why they might want to use it as a means of motivation, admitting it can “get some results because people (students) are afraid of them” (Chris).

All participants referred to superiority as having no place in the classroom. Instructor power was also demonstrated through feedback on written assignments although instead of providing constructive comments, evaluation was used to reflect a negative communication climate.

**Evaluation.** This defensive trait was reflected throughout additional questions asked of respondents. Not all of them could provide examples of an instructor providing an evaluating or judgmental remark in regards to student work or assignments, however three of the seven agreed with the amount of judgment that was visible during class discussion, “when you see people get shot down the first couple of days of class, you just don’t want to ask questions or ask for help” (Brynn), “There were a lot of cheap shots, if there was a question asked of students and someone would raise their hand to speak, the professor was like, ‘um no, you are wrong’,” (Sara).

If the negative communication behaviors were exhibited early in the semester, it led to little or no interaction between instructor and students throughout the remainder of the course.
As stated by Tanner, “Nobody tried to speak to him, there was no interaction, it was just straightforward lecture with no interaction with other students or the instructor.”

This evaluation was also felt by students in terms of written feedback on assignments, regardless of the time during the semester. As Chris frustratingly recalls:

I had turned in an assignment early hoping to get constructive feedback on what to improve on, and the only comment on my paper was, ‘follow instructions’. That was it. I felt evaluated, not supported and not learning anything in the process. (Chris)

Matt remembered a similar situation in which he had written a paper and it was returned with no comments at all, just a grade of a ‘D.’

I was frustrated, I thought I did well on the assignment, and then not having any feedback or comments made me not want to talk or meet with the instructor at all. (Matt)

All of these defensive causing communication traits reflected the amount of power exerted by instructors through neutrality, evaluation and superiority demonstrated in the classroom. Not only are there specific defensive communication traits used, students also demonstrated a negative communication climate occurred due to an instructor’s tone.

**Instructor Tone**

The defensive communication strategy reflected in interviews centered around instructor tone demonstrated in the classroom. Students noted the quality of an instructors tone, also referred to as their vocalics, as a cause of a defensive communication climate. Vocalics were interpreted by students as an instructor’s unwillingness to communicate and included those described by students as reflecting an instructor’s attitude of being harsh, short, and irritated, therefore causing a negative response by students in the classroom and leading to defensive
communication. An underlying cause was referred to by students as being a result of impacted classes at the university.

**Impacted Classes.** Impacted classes are a reality among students in most disciplines at this particular university and were mentioned as a possible cause of negative vocalics and interactions with instructors. Although this doesn’t seem to support a case for instructor defensiveness, it is noteworthy to fully understand more of the interactions between students and instructors. Impacted classes occur when there are more students wanting to enroll in a particular course than the number of courses offered. This leads to students having to enroll in more semesters to complete their degree. For example, as many of the classes fill up before the start of the semester, the opportunity to enroll in a course becomes more difficult leading to more potential conflict between student and instructor. Students are unaware that professors do not have to use the waitlist to enroll potential students, and many don’t realize each professor has his/her own system for adding students to already full classes. This leads to students not having options with specific courses or professors. Diane was one student who felt this impact. At the start of her final semester she remembered being very upset:

> There was one class I had to take, it was only offered at one time and since the instructor knew we had to take it, she was very demanding. She told us on the first day that there were additional class meetings we had to make outside the allotted class time, and if we didn’t we were going to fail. I knew I couldn’t commit to those additional times but had to stay in the course for the units in order to graduate. Luckily you added me and I didn’t have to stay in that class. (Diane)

Similar experiences were described by other participants as they expressed frustration with the process. Sara reported one professor who specifically acted unfriendly and very negatively on the first day of class. “It was though she wanted us to drop the class because there
were a lot of other students on the wait list, and she wanted to intimidate us.” These interactions become problematic not only during class time but during instructor office hours as well. With the increased number of students and courses taught by professors, students were feeling as though they were burdening their instructors when coming to ask for additional help.

I would come to his office hours and try to talk to him about course assignments, but it seemed like I was bothering him. I didn’t understand, it was like he looked at me like, “why are you here?” (Tanner)

Chris shared his frustrating experience with a long sigh, “I just stopped going to his office hours, I tried to figure out early on what my professor wanted so I didn’t have to interact with him. It was easier that way.” The current state of education at this university with impacted classes is not the only cause of defensive communication. Participants also recalled their previous experience with instructors leading to a negative communication climate.

**Prior Experiences with Instructors.** The final element of defensive communication stemmed from participant’s experiences with instructors. This was influenced by the number of negative interactions students had with professors in the past which in turn led them to provide either a poor evaluation of their professor to their peers or on the end of the semester evaluation report. Students purposely choose professors they have a positive history with or that they have not had negative communication with. As Nick was recalling his experiences with choosing instructors:

By the time you are taking your major classes, there are a core group of students you know pretty well so you end up talking in class when it is time to register for the next semester about who to take and who not to take. (Nick)
This can be helpful to students navigating the best route for their success. Students reported taking the time to research the course and professor by asking friends and looking online for any helpful information (Sara, Chris). Participants also noted times when they would never take a certain professor again because of their negative experience the first time around. Brynn spoke very openly about her past experiences:

There were a few professors I would just never take again. I learned to ask other students in my classes who was good and also used Rate My Professor to figure out who I should take. (Brynn)

Matt also learned how to navigate his way through choosing a professor based on previous experience. He spoke very adamantly about the process. “I go out of my way to take a class from a professor I know will be good, even if I am not as interested in the course.”

Defensive communication impacted participants during their interactions with instructors in the classroom as well as around campus. This was demonstrated through negative communication attributes of neutrality, superiority and evaluation, as well as a result of instructor tone and previous relationships with instructors.

**Results and Interpretations**

The following results are described using specific support and words of the interviewees from the transcriptions, and help to provide recommendations for the final chapter. Outlined first are the specific instructor behaviors leading to a positive communication climate in the undergraduate classroom.

**Result 1:** Instructors exhibiting a friendly mood, showing happiness, approachability, and flexibility, are more likely to create a positive communication climate.
Participants expressed the importance of these traits and how they play an important role in creating relationships between instructors and their students. Communication traits expressed through both verbal and nonverbal means demonstrated to students the instructor was eager to connect with them and enter into an interpersonal relationship. This is significant to students trying to discern the climate of the classroom and their expected role for the remainder of the semester. When students were able to interpret instructor communication as being supportive, they were able to enter a positive communication climate in the classroom leading to happier, more engaged students. When students were able to experience an instructor purposely approach them to ask questions and add clarification, this lead to students being more engaged in the learning process. Once interpersonal relationships were established, students were more likely to attend class, actively participate and spend time with an instructor during office hours. From a simple smile upon entering a classroom, to calling students by name and saying hello outside the classroom, these simple behaviors are crucial when establishing relationships and trying to create a positive communication climate.

Respondents emphasized the importance of the instructor greeting upon entering the classroom. Ranging from a smile, to showing friendliness with students through a greeting and interaction all assisted in creating a positive (supportive) climate. Previous studies by Teven (2001, 2007), Tinto (1987), and Zhuojun (2000) have demonstrated specific components of effective teaching by professors including the importance of establishing an interpersonal relationship through personal interaction and demonstrating a positive attitude. These components include remaining accessible, approachable and available through personal interaction with those students in their class. Also researched has been the importance of effective communication on positive teacher-student relationships (Hurt, Chris, & McCroskey,
This showed further support originally reported by Frymier & Houser (2000) using Burleson and Samter’s (1990) Communication Function Questionnaire (CFQ), Richmond et al. (1987) nonverbal immediacy scale and Gorham’s (1988) verbal immediacy scale.

Respondents reported on the importance of getting to know a professor and having open dialogue during interaction both in the classroom and during professor office hours. Zhuojun (2000) found that when students seek out a one-on-one relationship with professors outside class, it helps professors understand them better, which ultimately enhances their learning. Therefore, this study further expands the benefits provided to both students and professors through these interpersonal dialogues.

Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen (2007) found evidence that an instructor’s level of engagement and additional characteristics helped contribute to a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom and a more positive experience. This was specifically noted by respondents echoing the importance of instructor interaction, accessibility and approachability as being key factors in a positive communication climate. Students expressed the importance of a flexible professor who understands the changing needs of the classroom, which is further supported by Henning (2010) and the use of supportive communication in the classroom, which demonstrated the importance of instructor flexibility and affective communicative style.

**Result 2: The lack of verbal and nonverbal instructor communication reflecting the lack of desire to interact with students leads to a more negative and defensive communication climate.**
Respondents commented on the number of professors who walked into a classroom without making eye contact with students or greeting them in any way, leading to them feeling a lack of concern from their instructor. As the instructors were demonstrating very little nonverbal immediacy, the students became aware of the intended communication sent and interpreted it accordingly. If an instructor failed to make eye contact, smile or greet students, the communication majors interpreted the behavior as a professor with no desire to initiate an interpersonal relationship. The interpersonal relationship is important in the college classroom between student and instructor, and is what assists in the creation of a positive or negative communication climate. When an instructor fails to initiate an interpersonal relationship, students take it personally.

Respondents mentioned their inability to approach instructors who did not initiate verbal or nonverbal greetings, making the student feel intimidated and unimportant. Because of this, students did not begin to share and exchange information and dialogue with the instructor, leading to an impersonal relationship. With this lack of interpersonal exchange, a defensive communication climate in the classroom formed. Once this defensive climate formed at the beginning of a semester, it effected student interaction, participation and overall learning in the classroom.

These findings supportive previous studies by Teven & Monte (2008), finding the importance of nonverbal immediacy to be important to creating a supportive communication climate. Teven & Monte (2008) also define solidarity in the classroom as combining nonverbal immediacy, clarity, and active learning, which has shown to lead to “increases in cognitive learning” (Nussbaum & Chris, 1981). Therefore, by providing nonverbal immediacy through
cues associated with greeting rituals and typical nonverbal behaviors, the defensive communication climate can be changed into a supportive one. An important factor in changing communication climates from defensive to supportive is to remember that although climates are not controlled by either students or teachers, “it is the teachers (because they are the authority figures) who can overcome the dominant socialization in ways that lead to more supportive communication practices” (Garvin-Doxas & Barker, 2004).

Result 3: Superiority is a common theme among students when expressing negative interactions in the undergraduate college classroom.

Throughout the interviews, students emphasized their disdain for instructors expressing superiority, regardless of intent. All respondents recalled a specific example of instructor interaction with students during class sessions that demonstrated ego and the belittling of students. These verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors lead to a negative communication climate in which students are more likely to not actively engage during class discussions or spend additional time meeting with the instructor. This is important because in many cases, students coming from a negative communication climate often need more explanation and clarification on assignments, and are not likely to meet with their instructor during office hours. Students are intimidated and/or simply don’t want to expose themselves to the possibility of further belittling and possible confrontation.

Another commonality further showing the extent of this trait was the number of examples focusing on the achievements stated by instructors. While it may seem harmless to focus on the educational background of a college professor when engaged in classroom teaching, students are put off by the instructor who emphasizes their degree or experience. Students also
find the implied title of “Dr.” to be another form of separation and an additional component adding to a defensive communication climate. What is important to note, however, is that the presence of superiority (whether real or imagined) and the power dynamic will always exist as part of the student instructor relationship. What previous research has shown is how self-disclosure can help or hinder the power dynamic of the student instructor relationship.

This power dynamic can be influenced through the process of self-disclosure and in some research was found to have no impact on the interpersonal relationship. Self-disclosure for the sake of self-disclosing, with no direct connection to the subject matter, was found to have no positive impact on student motivation (Cayanus & Martin, 2002). This was further supported by Wambach & Brothen (1997) and McCarthy & Schmeck (1982). Lannutti and Strautman (2006), also found certain types of disclosure may not be acceptable in the college classroom. Therefore, disclosing previous educational accomplishments has no positive impact on student learning and can be perceived by students as a purposeful means to provide further separation and superiority in the classroom. Research did find if self-disclosure was used in a purposeful manner directly related to course content, it can have an increased impact on student participation (Sorensen, 1989; Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). Therefore, instructors should be mindful of the type of personal information they are purposely disclosing to try and prevent the obvious separation and superiority of instructors.

Summary

This chapter detailed the findings of the study, illustrated through participants’ own words and later interpreted into results through integration of relevant literature. Findings
included three major themes focusing on positive instructor traits, supportive communication behaviors, and defensive communication behaviors.

Results included Instructors exhibiting a friendly mood, showing happiness, approachability, and flexibility, are more likely to create a positive communication climate. Also, the lack of verbal and nonverbal instructor communication reflecting the lack of desire to interact with students lead to a more negative and defensive communication climate. Finally superiority is a common theme among students when expressing defensive communication behaviors in the undergraduate college classroom.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore how student perceptions of instructor communication behaviors in undergraduate college classrooms, influence the communication climate. The majority of research, focusing on communication interactions between undergraduate students and instructors in the college classroom, is quantitative in nature. While this provides insight into the frequency and effects of specific defensive and supportive communication patterns, missing are the voices of the students to further understand their perceptions of their relationships with faculty.

The phenomenological research approach utilized semi-structured interviews, including field notes and transcripts, which were then analyzed to determine common themes and phenomena. Interview questions focused on identifying key components of a positive and negative communication climate as well as specific instructor behaviors leading to both a supportive and defensive climate. The findings included three major themes focusing on communication traits, supportive communication behaviors and defensive communication behaviors.

Results included Instructors exhibiting a friendly mood, showing happiness, approachability, and flexibility, are more likely to create a positive communication climate. The lack of verbal and nonverbal instructor communication reflecting the lack of desire to interact with students lead to a more negative and defensive communication climate. Superiority is a common theme among students when expressing defensive communication behaviors in the undergraduate classroom. Conclusions and recommendations for further action, and future research follow as the closing section of the research process.
Conclusions

Understanding how the interpersonal relationship between instructor and student influences the communication climate in an undergraduate classroom was the overarching purpose of this research study. While the questions posed were broad in nature, the interview protocol and accompanying literature review provided a framework focused on the interpersonal relationship between instructor and students, components of a positive and negative communication climate, and instructor behaviors contributing to the communication climate. The researcher compiled findings from the interviews, much of which fit in the scope of the literature review, and was able to link key themes to further support previous research. The researcher was also able to determine additional issues important to students as they navigate their way through the undergraduate classroom.

At the start of the research process, the research questions seemed to have very different underlying themes to be explored. However, as the interview protocol was conducted and findings were analyzed, there were many responses that overlapped both research questions. With all the findings relating directly back to instructor behavior and its impact on the communication in the undergraduate classroom.

Research Question 1: How do students describe the positive and negative elements of classroom climates?

With the prompting of the interview protocol pertaining to Gibb category research, students were able to provide specific elements of the positive and negative classroom climates. Students described a positive (supportive) classroom climate as one that encouraged open dialogue between instructor and students. Descriptions included the presence of an encouraging
place to share thoughts, ideas and information. The ability to empathize with students and show concern for issues and experiences outside the classroom was another positive element. Equality also became an important theme among students expressing their thoughts on a positive climate, including the ability to be treated with respect by their instructor and fellow students and to be asked about their thoughts and opinions.

Research Question 2: What faculty behaviors do students perceive as contributing positively or negatively to classroom climate?

There was obvious consensus among students in their description of the elements of both positive and negative classroom climates. Students were quick to point out instructor behaviors as specific elements of a classroom climate. It was difficult for respondents to separate the description of a positive element from specific instructor behavior therefore, many elements listed were based on the actual communication behaviors in the classroom. The impact of how an instructor chooses to enter a classroom and greets students was determined a positive or negative element to the climate. An instructor who smiled and greeted students while willing to interact with them was deemed positive. Likewise, an instructor who made no attempt to reveal a friendly nature through eye contact or facial expressions was interpreted as having a negative impact on the climate.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings, results, and conclusions from this study, the researcher makes the following recommendations for future practice in the undergraduate college classroom. The recommendations require action from both the institution and instructor.
Also included are recommendations for future research, which will help expand the findings, results, and conclusions of this study. Since the study was specific in regards to a specific site, future research could expand on further exploring and understanding the topic at a multitude of institutions throughout the United States.

**Recommendations for colleges and universities**

It is recommended that college and universities could begin to recognize the magnitude of communication interactions existing in undergraduate classrooms regardless of subject taught. In doing so, there could be emphasis placed on understanding the impact professors have on their students through both verbal and non-verbal means. This could be achieved through:

1. Graduate students choosing a track focusing on research, application or teaching within their area of study. Those taking courses focused on teaching in their discipline would be taught courses in “how to teach” their subject. This would involve simultaneously focusing on the importance of interpersonal relationships between instructors and students alongside the communication climate in the classroom. Spending adequate time getting students to understand these inevitable dynamics could have significant gains in their future student’s time in college.

2. Presenting faculty and graduate students with the opportunity for faculty mentors with specific focus on the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and defensive and supportive communication climates in the classroom. This could happen in conjunction with graduate programs during a student’s time spent as a teaching assistant and/or during their final year to prepare them further for college teaching, as well as an ongoing teaching development opportunity across college campuses.
3. It is further recommended that each college and university, recognizing the importance of the changing learning environment through instructors taking on a multitude of roles (facilitator, mentor, coach and lecturer) focuses on hiring faculty meeting the communication requirements of these roles; or preparing faculty through additional professional development opportunities on the dynamics of instructor-student relationships.

Recommendations for instructors/professors

In determining a potential career in teaching higher education, the following recommendations are suggested as a means of better understanding the communication climate in the college classroom.

1. Professors/instructors could take advantage of professional development courses, workshops and/or seminars offered through their college/university relating directly to improving the classroom climate through becoming more aware of their student population (e.g. veterans, first generation college students, etc.). This could provide insight into previous experiences and mindsets that could greatly influence the communication interactions in the college classroom.

2. Professors/instructors could look into opportunities through their centers for teaching and learning to understand more about the student/instructor dynamic and request opportunities for mentoring from experienced colleagues.

3. Professors/instructors could be more self-aware of their nonverbal communication, especially when entering the classroom. Although not typically associated with the
teaching profession, there is an element of “performing” that exists when leading college classroom. Making it necessary to smile and greet students upon entering helping them to feel welcome while creating a comfortable, positive climate in which to learn.

4. Professors/instructors could be more mindful of their verbal behaviors, purposely talking to students using language that is neither demeaning nor degrading. Additionally, purposeful attempts could be made to interact with students to show more care and concern at the beginning of the semester.

5. Professors/instructors could take the time to reflect on student evaluations at the end of every course taught. In all evaluations there exists some question(s) that ties directly to communication interactions between instructor and student. Since professors receive a copy of each evaluation, the scores could serve as an opportunity for self-improvement in the area of interpersonal communication. By instructors focusing on this aspect of teaching, they could impact student morale and academic achievement.

6. In courses where no formal evaluations are offered, professors/instructors could ask students for informal feedback assessing their ability to provide a supportive communication climate in the classroom. This could be a simple anonymous survey asking students to rate an instructor’s approachability, flexibility, respect, etc.

**Summary**

This study revealed the importance of the instructor-student relationships in the undergraduate college classroom. Positive and negative communication climates exist in every classroom and are determined by the instructor interaction from the beginning of a semester.
Components as seemingly insignificant as a smile or greeting proved to have a large impact on the overall student satisfaction with the instructor and course as well as learning. Instructors could be mindful of their presence and how a casual conversation with students can be just as necessary and meaningful as a lecture on meeting a specific outcome or objective.
References


doi:10.1080/03634520902926851


Walton, J. (n.d.). *Examining_a_transformative_app.PDF*.


Appendix A

When answering the following questions, think about one of the most recent classes you had, (typically described as the emotional tone of an interaction).

1. Which of your classes would you like to tell me about? (When did you have it?, what time of day was it? Can you describe the instructor, demographics?) How would you describe the climate (the overall emotional tone) of that class?

2. What were some examples that illustrated the positive communication atmosphere of that class?

3. What were some examples that illustrated the negative communication atmosphere of that class?

4. As you think about the instructor, were there any personal characteristics of the instructor that you felt contributed to that positive atmosphere?

5. Was there anything that the instructor did deliberately to set expectations for the communication tone? Were there instructions on the syllabus? Did the instructor say anything about communication expectations in class? What impact did this have on the atmosphere? Can you give an example?

6. Tell me about your relationships with the instructor, did he/she try to explain situations fairly without labeling them good or bad? Did he/she present personal feelings and perceptions without implying that a similar response was expected from you? Did your instructor help you understand the reasons for his/her opinions? (Evaluation v. Description)
7. Tell me about the specific tone or interactions with your instructor, did you feel treated with respect? As an equal? (Superiority v. Equality)

8. Did he/she seem interested in any concerns or problems you had throughout the course, and willing to discuss or assist you? Did your instructor seem to genuinely listen to your concerns or problems with interest? Did the instructor focus his/her attention on the problems to be solved? (Neutrality v. Empathy)

9. Tell me a little about the format of the class. What was the general subject? How many students were in the class? Was it a lecture class, discussion class, lab class? Was there an online component?

10. Do you think the format had any impact on the communication atmosphere? If so, in what way? Can you give an example?

11. Do you think there was anything outside of the instructor’s control that also might also have influenced the communication atmosphere? If so, what might those be? Can you give any examples?

12. How did this communication atmosphere affect how you communicated with the instructor? What was an example of how the atmosphere affected your communication with the instructor?

13. What should instructors do differently to improve the overall communication climate in the classroom?
Appendix B

Letter of Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in research which will be conducted by Frances Winters, a faculty member in the communication department at California State University, Sacramento. The study will investigate factors related to communication interactions between professors and students.

You will be asked a series of semi-structured questions asking you to reflect on previous courses you have taken at Sac State and the specific communication climate that was created through the interactions between your professors and classmates. The interview may take up to one hour of your time.

Although the questions focus on the communication behaviors in your college courses, if there are any you feel uncomfortable answering you don’t have to.

Only first names will be used in the interviews, and you may use something other than your real name if you wish. With your permission the interviews will be recorded. Those tapes will be destroyed as soon as the interviews have been transcribed, and in any event no later than one year after they were made. Until that time, they will be stored in a secure location.

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact Frances Winters at (916) 835-5171 or by e-mail at fwinters@saclink.csus.edu

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. Your signature below indicates that you have read this page and agree to participate in the research.

________________________________   ________________ ________________
Signature of Participant     Date