Effective Instructional Practice:

Maximizing Your Communicator Style

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Communicator style is conceptualized as an individual's use of verbal and nonverbal behaviors that indicate how literal meaning should be "taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood" (Norton, 1978, p. 99). In the classroom, your communicator style acts not only as a guide for how you communicate with your students, but it also creates expectations for your students on how they can (or cannot) communicate with you (Norton, 1983). Your communicator style consists of 2-4 attributes (hereafter referred to as a "cluster") which--when coupled with your personality and communication traits-- emerges as an observable form of self-presentation that focuses on the relational component of a message and centers on *how* you communicate a given message rather than *what* you communicate in the message (Myers, 2009).

Your cluster can consist of any combination of 10 attributes, which are dominant, contentious, precise, impression leaving, dramatic, animated, open, attentive, friendly, and relaxed (Norton, 1978, 1983). *Dominant* individuals are "take charge" communicators. They talk longer, louder, and more frequently than others. *Contentious* individuals are considered to be argumentative because they challenge others by disagreeing with them. *Precise* individuals are mindful of their choice of language and nonverbal behaviors because they strive to be accurate in their communication. *Impression leaving* individuals communicate in a memorable manner. *Dramatic* individuals utilize verbal communication through their use of picturesque language and stylistic devices such as exaggeration and rhythm. *Animated* individuals rely heavily on

nonverbal communication through their use of gestures, eye behavior, and facial expressions. *Open* individuals directly communicate with others as they are conversational, frank, and approachable. *Attentive* individuals are good listeners and are responsive, empathic, and encouraging. *Friendly* individuals are confirming, kind, and caring in their communicative behaviors. *Relaxed* individuals appear anxiety-free and poised when interacting with others.

Maximizing your communicator style in the classroom is important for three reasons. First, teaching effectiveness is equated with instructor use of particular communicator style attributes. "Better" instructors are considered to use the impression leaving, friendly, relaxed, dramatic, and open attributes at a higher rate than "worse" instructors (Andersen, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Schroeder & Leber, 1993) and "above average" instructors are perceived to be more precise and attentive, but less contentious, than "below average" instructors (Bednar & Brandenburg, 1984). In the organizational training classroom, "more effective" trainers are rated more so as impression leaving, open, dramatic, relaxed, and animated than "less effective" trainers (Bednar & Heisler, 1985).

Second, students are more likely to interact with their instructors when instructors exemplify particular attributes. For instance, when instructors use the friendly attribute, students are motivated to communicate with them in order to learn more about them personally, to inquire about course assignments, to participate in class, and to be perceived favorably (Myers, Mottet, & Martin, 2000). Third, students report that their affective and behavioral learning increases when instructors use the impression leaving, friendly, relaxed, open, attentive, and dramatic communicator style attributes (Andersen

et al.,1981 Myers & Horvath, 1997). They also report that their cognitive learning increases when instructors use the friendly, relaxed, precise, and dominant attributes (Myers & Horvath).

Five Tips on Using Communicator Style in the Classroom

1. Because teaching is just one facet of your personality, your *teaching* communicator style is not going to be identical to your *overall* communicator style (Norton, 1986). Therefore, it is important to realize that students generally respond most favorably to classroom instruction and learning when instructors use six of the 10 communicator style attributes: friendly, relaxed, open, impression leaving, dramatic, and precise. Strive to use these six attributes in the classroom regardless of whether you use (or do not use) the same attributes in your daily interpersonal interactions.

2. Of the six aforementioned attributes, the dramatic attribute is most closely associated with teaching effectiveness because students respond affirmatively to instructors who incorporate humor, self-disclosure, and narratives into their teaching. These instructors are considered to be good storytellers and to be entertaining (Norton & Nussbaum, 1980). To use this attribute, work on being energetic, learn how to make your class laugh, reflect on what your students consider to be entertaining, and anticipate how to catch and hold your students' attention (Norton, 1986).

3. For many students, their communication satisfaction is tied to whether their instructors and academic advisors use the friendly and attentive attributes with them (Myers, 2012; Prisbell, 1994). Your use of these two attributes implicitly informs students that you believe that they are an important component of the learning process. When using these two attributes with students, be tactful yet encouraging, verbally

acknowledge their contributions to class discussion, demonstrate empathy as needed, and listen carefully to what they say (Norton, 1983).

4. Consider that the 10 attributes easily lend themselves to one of three instructor profiles as offered by Potter and Emanuel (1990). Because communicator style is modifiable, you can strategically use specific attributes to make a particular impression or a way to enhance your own job satisfaction. If you want to be perceived as an authority figure by your students, use the dominant, contentious, and precise attributes with them. If you desire to be viewed as entertaining, use the impression leaving, dramatic, and animated attributes with your students. If you would like to communicate with your students in a relational manner, use the open, attentive, friendly, and relaxed attributes. To increase your job satisfaction, use the open, attentive, relaxed, and impression leaving attributes (DiClemente, Ditrinco, Gibbons, & Myers, 2013).

5. If you are uneasy with using a particular attribute or its use does not feel "right," then do not use it. Remain mindful of the attributes that are associated generally with teaching effectiveness, but always use the attributes that you can utilize sincerely, confidently, and comfortably when interacting with your students. Consider your students, as well as the learning context, when determining which attributes will work best in your classroom.

Assessing Your Communicator Style

To assess your communicator style, do so by completing either the 51-item Communicator Style Measure (Norton, 1978; the Measure also is available in Graham, 1994) or the 10-item Communicator Style Measure short form (Montgomery & Norton, 1981).

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