

# Instructional Immediacy Practices in Online Learning Environments

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## Abstract

It is essential to create an online environment where students feel motivated and engaged, in order to achieve effective learning. Online learning environments (OLEs) enable tutors to apply various methods of enhancing students' communication, so that the issue of feeling isolated is addressed and worthwhile learning can take place. A significant body of the literature has asserted that communication practices in the classroom are an important factor to the learning process and the student-tutor relationship. Immediacy is part of communication practices that support students learning in face-to-face and online classes. This study presents the most important immediacy practices that can help tutors to enhance students' learning by decreasing the physical and psychological distance between students and tutors in online learning and increasing student-tutor interaction. Immediacy has been shown to be a remarkable predictor of perceived online learning, positively affecting students' interest and engagement in a course. Hence, students become more willing to participate and communicate with their tutors and peers. Tutors should therefore be aware of these practices and understand how to apply them effectively in the enhancement of students' online learning.

**Keywords:** Immediacy, Online learning, Student interaction, Isolation, student engagement.

## 1. Introduction

The lack of social interaction and physical distance between students and tutors in online learning environments (OLEs) can create a sense of isolation, thus impacting on students' interest and motivation (Salmon, 2013). As a result, it is essential to create an online environment where students feel motivated and engaged, in order to achieve effective learning. Tutors need to perform many functions to enhance social interaction and facilitate teaching and learning processes, including answering questions, encouraging students, providing feedback, and helping students to learn in an OLE (Akhter, 2012; Motte, 2013; Salmon, 2013).

An OLE is a new version of distance learning that facilitates accessing to learning experiences and promotes interactivity via the Internet (Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen, 2011). In online learning, tutors use platforms such as Blackboard and WebCT that support teaching and learning process (Ni, 2013). OLEs also enable tutors to apply various methods of enhancing students' communication and help tackle the problem of feeling isolated. It is important to realise that teaching with the aid of online learning environment provides a different kind of accessibility and opportunity from that which is afforded by the face-to-face classroom (Ni, 2013). For example, OLEs can include a wide range of learning materials, such as graphics, and audio- or video materials. These facilitate the teaching and learning process and reduce the perceived physical and psychological distance between tutors and students (Walkem, 2014).

The role of the tutor in an OLE is one that moves from that of a solitary tutor to one of participation in the learning process by sharing knowledge with students and facilitating their learning. Tutors' communication and interaction with students in an OLE is important for helping to enhance student learning (Baker, 2004; Conaway et al., 2005). When a tutor communicates immediately and uses immediacy practices, students are more likely to see him or her as someone approachable, who cares about them as individuals and about their learning (Melrose, 2009; Walkom, 2014). Therefore, the psychological and physical distance between students and tutors decreases and the relationship between all involved becomes stronger and more positive, as in a face-to-face classroom (Fahara & Castro, 2015). However, tutors need to consciously create and sustain a positive OLE by using immediacy as an effective online teaching method (Baker, 2004).

## 2. Tutor Immediacy

Immediacy is the extent to which verbal and nonverbal communication behaviour enhances closeness and reduces physical and/or psychological distance between those who are communicating (Mehrabian, 1969). Communication behaviour refers to an ongoing process of sending and receiving messages that enable humans to share knowledge, attitudes, feelings and skills (Johanson & Savannah, 1999). Where immediacy characterises the communicative activities being performed, Mehrabian (1967, 1969, 1972) notes that it potentially reduces the

distance between those who are communicating, reflects enjoyment and affect, and increases sensory stimulation between the individuals concerned (Zhang & Oetzel, 2006). Manarte, Lopes and Pereira (2014) state that immediacy may be defined in different ways over time, although all of these ways are focused on the perceptions of physical, emotional or psychological relations created by positive communicative behaviour.

In an educational context, immediacy refers to tutor practices that create an effective learning environment and support students' learning experiences (Manarte et al., 2014). Immediacy practices in the classroom help the tutor convey warmth and increase the level of physiological arousal amongst students (Richmond, 1990). The literature on immediacy illustrates that it is one of the foremost means of increasing affective learning outcomes; the rationale being that students can respond to behaviours that promote a strong interpersonal connection (Ozmen, 2011). Manarte et al. (2014) assert that tutors who are close to their students are likely to achieve superior results to those who distance themselves socially, emotionally and psychologically.

To substantiate the above, research has shown that immediacy in teaching practice can affect students' learning outcomes (Al Ghamdi, 2017), cognitive learning (Goodboy, Weber & Bolkan, 2009), motivation (Chesebro & McCroskey, 2001; Chesebro, 2003), attendance, and participation (Myers, Zhong & Guan, 1998). Communication and educational studies have revealed that both verbal and nonverbal immediacy practices have an influence on the learning environment. Nonverbal immediacy consists of body language, rather than verbal expression, to convey messages in unconscious ways. It may take the form of eye contact, smiling or gestures (Mandal, 2014). Nonverbal communication is taken in by all five senses, so that messages are received and interpreted through touch, taste and smell (Schmitz, 2012); it conveys the meanings of words through bodily expression (Velez & Cano, 2012), while verbal communication communicates feelings using words.

Verbal immediacy therefore involves the use of language, which is made up of symbols. Schmitz (2012) defines a symbol as "something that stands in for or represents something else" (p.124) and according to Manarte et al. (2014), "verbal communication consists of representative codes where iconic or symbolic signs used (such as spoken or written words) produce a text independent of what it represents and of its encoder" (p.210). Verbal immediacy is defined by Mehrabian (1966) as "the degree of directness and intensity of interaction between communicator and referent in a communicator's linguistic message" (Wolfe & Waters, 2013, p.97). Verbal immediacy can include the following: praise, humour, personal pronouns, addressing others by name, demonstrating a willingness to converse, asking questions, and using personal examples (Mazer, 2013). Verbal communicative actions contributing to immediacy include the use of the present tense and inclusive language. Therefore, verbal immediacy appears to be an overtly communicative ability that does not require substantial interpretation on the part of the recipient (Spiker, 2014). Moreover, it is advantageous in face-to-face classrooms. Mazer (2013) found that verbal immediacy positively affects student interest and engagement on a course. Hence, students are more willing to participate and communicate with their tutors and peers.

In contrast to the above, tutors who engage in excessive verbal communication with students can violate the expectations of those students; leading to students perceiving them as apathetic and irresponsible. This is clearly detrimental to students' perceptions of their tutors (Sidelinger & Bolen, 2014). Moreover, according to Witt et al. (2010), immediacy practices may lead to professional or personal problems being encountered with colleagues or administrators. The above authors note that tutors' immediacy could be perceived as poor classroom management or a weak influence.

Irrespective of the above-mentioned issues, verbal immediacy is particularly appropriate in the online environment and has been shown to be a significant predictor of perceived online learning (Arbaugh, 2010). In an OLE, verbal immediacy may be more relevant, as most online communication is in text form, such as email and discussion boards (Ni & Aust, 2008). Tutors' verbal immediacy has been proved to be effective for promoting online learning that occurs when students feel interest from their tutors, and when their overall experience of the interaction is warm and personable (Al Ghamdi, 2017). Most studies on online verbal immediacy have used quantitative methods to collect data and measure students' perceptions of such an approach, whereas few studies have examined verbal immediacy from the point of view of qualitative or mixed methods. The existing quantitative studies on verbal immediacy in online learning have used the instrument developed by Gorham (1988). Gorham's measurement includes teachers' verbal immediacy in face-to-face classroom situations, such as the use of personal examples and humour, encouraging students to talk, and discussing the issues brought up by students in class. A review of the recent literature will reveal new elements of verbal immediacy in an online learning setting. This paper consequently attempts to present the most effective tutor immediacy practices in OLEs in a review of the communication and education literature.

## 2.1. Feedback

Feedback is one of the main practices characterising verbal immediacy in an online pedagogical context, whereby a strong relationship is revealed between feedback and students' perceptions of high immediacy from their tutors. Feedback is a tutor's response to students' work and actions (Gallien & Oomen, 2008); it becomes the bridge between what the student knows and what the student needs to know, rendering it essential for

knowledge building (Conrad & Dabbagh, 2015). Studies have shown that feedback can greatly help students to achieve their learning outcomes and that it encourages self-reflection, with students subsequently assessing their own learning (Bonnell, 2008; Baleni, 2015). Feedback is important on online courses, because students often lack face-to-face interaction and may feel disconnected from their tutors and peers. Online feedback helps students to see how well they are progressing on a course and whether they need to alter their learning styles to achieve more successful learning, as well as helping them benefit from courses (Bonnell et al., 2008).

In an OLE, tutor feedback can take on a variety of forms, including synchronous and asynchronous communication. Feedback may also be presented as a video, audio-material and written comments. Tutors can stimulate online interaction and learning amongst students through motivational feedback delivered to one student, content-specific corrective feedback to another, and general clarification and instructions (Garvey & Sherlock, 2010). However, a lack of feedback on online courses can contribute to potential problems, such as learners' attrition, failure, and dissatisfaction (Conrad & Dabbagh, 2015).

Feedback is an element of verbal immediacy that can enhance social interaction in online learning, building a sense of community and providing encouragement (Bonnell, 2008). However, written feedback can frequently be misunderstood or interpreted differently from how the tutor intended (Folley, 2013). For example, online feedback may need to be more explicit and detailed to avoid misinterpretation. Thus, tutors should take greater care over the clarity of their feedback to minimise misunderstanding. In addition, the absence of nonverbal communication behaviour in an online environment can impact how feedback is interpreted (Folley, 2013). Folley (2013) also notes that tutors can compensate for this to some extent by making reassuring comments, such as 'Do not panic' or 'Everyone did really well'.

## **2.2. Tutor Self-disclosure**

Self-disclosure is the act of revealing personal information to other people. It is a fundamental element of verbal communication behaviour to build interpersonal relationships (Derlega et al., 1993). Studies have revealed that disclosing personal information to others can foster intimacy (Collins & Miller, 1994). Tutor self-disclosure is defined as personal information or experience that is shared with students to enhance the learning environment and engage them (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008). According to Hosek and Thompson (2009), tutors who provide some personal knowledge and background for their students can be more effective in clarifying and illustrating the content of a lesson. This can also be important for facilitating students' online learning experience by increasing their participation and interaction, while reducing the psychological distance between the tutor and students (Mazer et al., 2007, Al Ghamdi, Samarji & Watt, 2016). In terms of various immediacy practices, relatively little research has been conducted on the role of tutor self-disclosure in an OLE.

## **2.3. Asking Questions**

Tutors need to design their online courses with a view to facilitating and engaging student learning and interaction. These courses should include open-ended questions that encourage critical and creative thinking. Moreover, tutors' questions will elicit social interaction and enable a sense of community to form through students' participation and interaction with peers and their tutors (Kienle & Ritterskamp, 2007). There are several types of question that will encourage students' online learning and interaction, such as questions requesting more clarification, open-ended questions, cause-and-effect questions, and summary questions (Mokoena, 2013).

## **2.4. Clarifying Course Objectives and Information**

In an OLE, comprehensive instructions, objectives, assignments and requirements must be provided and clarified to students. These items should be posted on discussion boards prior to student enrolment. Poll, Widen and Weller (2014) suggest that a tutor send additional emails and announcements to students before the beginning of a course to help them prepare for it and to motivate their learning. Sheridan and Kelly (2010) found that actions performed to clarify course requirements form part of tutors' behaviour to indicate their online presence; a concept underpinned by immediacy. Ensuring accuracy of information, however, is an issue that has not been dealt with in other studies. The importance attributed to this by participants can in some way reflect the perceived isolation commonly experienced by students when studying at a distance. As noted by Smith, Ferguson and Caris (2002), ambiguous directions or instructions cannot be easily resolved by students in an online environment, as they lack access to nonverbal communication, or to an immediate question-and-answer exchange (Baker, 2004; Walkem, 2014).

## **2.5. Timely Response**

Prompt responses from tutors to students are clearly identified as an aspect of tutor immediacy (Walkem, 2014), indicating that a tutor is consistently present and available, thus creating a sense of closeness between tutors and students (Al Ghamdi et al., 2016). This is largely because students may feel assured knowing that a tutor is at

hand to provide support and answers when required. Conversely, students' desire for easy access to tutors and rapid responses to their queries can lead to tension, because tutors usually have other competing professional demands on their time and are not always able to respond promptly. One possible compromise is for tutors to inform students at the beginning of term about expected response times for emails and other queries. A realistic response time will help students to develop clear expectations. It is also advisable for students to be notified of instances when this response time could be extended for any reason. Similarly, they can be notified of office hours, when tutors are available for face-to-face consultation (Walkem, 2014). Additionally, assigning daily or weekly forum posts in response to course material is an effective method of encouraging student learning (Poll et al., 2014). According to Haughton and Romero (2009), a weekly scheduled open chat with a tutor is an effective strategy for determining a student's level of engagement, as well as his/her sense of isolation.

## 2.6. Responding to Individual Learning Concerns

In a face-to-face classroom, students are more likely to express their needs and concerns to tutors who show them care and appreciation. The more students perceive their tutors as caring about them, the more they will care about their lessons and pay attention in class. As a result, they are likely to learn more of the course material (Teven & McCroskey, 1997; Muller, 2001). Meanwhile, in online learning, students who systematically miss face-to-face classes or experience difficulties with their online course may be contacted directly using a variety of communication tools, such as private emails or discussion boards. This minimises the risk of students falling behind on a course or dropping out altogether (Haughton & Romero, 2009).

It should be borne in mind here that in an OLE, students tend to be more mature in age and likely to be building on existing qualifications, or attempting to gain important skills for their working lives. In addition, they often have a busy schedule, trying to balance their personal and working lives with their education. Tutors should therefore acknowledge students' responsibilities and maintain an awareness of their everyday lives (Walkom, 2014). In fact, students usually develop a strong interpersonal relationship with tutors who take their life situations into account (Melrose & Bergeron, 2006). Therefore, tutors' care and acknowledgement of their students' situations in OLEs comprise key immediacy practices.

## 2.7. Humour

Dean (1997) defines humour as whatever an individual finds funny and produces laughter. Meanwhile, Martin et al. (2003) developed a measure of four styles of humour: self-enhancing, affiliative, aggressive and self-defeating. Affiliative humour is used to attract others with jokes, funny stories, and other forms of appealing humour. In comparison to affiliative humour, self-enhancing humour is more focused on individuals who use humour to help them maintain a constructive view of life. Martin et al. (2003) found that styles of humour are related to levels of self-esteem and favourable emotions. For example, self-defeating humour is characteristic of individuals who ridicule themselves to amuse other people, while aggressive humour includes belittling and excessive teasing, making the perpetrators feel better about themselves at other people's expense.

Humour plays an important role in nurturing an open, warm and friendly climate in the classroom, with students perceiving that they learn better from tutors who use a humorous approach (James, 2004). Additionally, some studies have shown that humour used in teaching can relieve students' stress, engage their attention and create an effective learning environment. Students say that humour can make tutors more likeable, facilitate their understanding of course material, lower tension, boost their morale and increase their attentiveness (White, 2001).

Therefore, tutors will need to make significant adaptations to their traditional teaching methods when teaching in an OLE. James (2004) indicates that the use of humour is the most effective method of engaging student learning online. It can take the form of written comments, the use of familiar phrases in e-mail responses, and the sharing of personal experiences. However, in some cultures, humour is not seen as socially acceptable in the public forum of a classroom setting (James, 2004).

## 3. Conclusion

The goal of this paper is to present the primary immediacy practices that can be used in an OLE. According to previous studies, tutors' immediacy practices are an effective online teaching method for students to enhance their interaction and build an effective learning environment (Baker, 2004; Melrose & Bergeron, 2006; Walkom, 2014). In an OLE, tutors need to structure and facilitate students' communication and participation through the use of immediacy. Tutors should also be aware of these communication forms and understand how to apply them in an effective way to enhance students' online learning. The current paper highlights the main immediacy practices that can be used by tutors in OLEs. Further research on the immediacy practices on online learning environments is needed. For example, there is a need to continue to explore the difference between tutors' immediacy practices in asynchronous and synchronous learning tools. Furthermore, there is needed to consider the factors such as tutors' IT skills and experience; course design and student background and the effect of these

factors on the type of immediacy practices in online learning environments.

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