“It Helped Push Me Through the Class”: Community College Student Perceptions of the Role of Instructor Immediacy Behaviors in Completing an Online Course

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Abstract

For decades, the number of students enrolling in online courses has been increasing, and this trend toward online education has been further intensified as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The completion rate of online courses is not as high as in-person instruction, and researchers and practitioners have long been invested in identifying ways in which online education can be optimized. One dimension of online education that has received scholarly attention is the *transactional distance* that exists between students and instructors, which, if not appropriately minimized, can lead to a variety of negative student outcomes. Scholars have also identified a variety of verbal and nonverbal *immediacy behaviors* that can help online instructors decrease this transactional distance and promote a variety of positive student outcomes. To date, the study of immediacy behaviors in online college courses has focused primarily on four-year institutions utilizing quantitative methods. As complement to this research, we interviewed 12 community college students to better understand how a particular set of immediacy behaviors (i.e., a “welcome” phone call, sending personalized emails, using humor, creating videos, and sending “check-in” emails) influenced students’ desire and ability to remain in and complete an online course. Implications of these findings for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Online teaching, online learning, immediacy, immediacy behaviors, transactional distance

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Over the last decade, the number of college students taking online courses has grown significantly in the U.S., with over half of college students enrolled in online coursework as of 2020 (51.8%; Smalley, 2021). At the community college level, this has led to an increase in online courses that has outpaced the increase in traditional, in-person courses (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Although the successful completion of online courses can nearly double the likelihood that community college students earn a degree or transfer to a four-year institution (Shea & Bidjerano, 2019), there is a "tipping point" of online coursework (i.e., 40% of course enrollment) beyond which the beneficial effects of taking community college courses online begin to diminish (Shea & Bidjerano, 2018). Overall, student success in online coursework (e.g., course completion, academic performance, persistence to future coursework) continues to lag traditional course delivery (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Bawa, 2016; Glazier, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, Tate & Warschauer, 2022).

Research on online education reveals a variety of factors associated with students' struggles in online learning. For example, college instructors are rarely trained in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment (Bair & Bair, 2011; Chang, 2018; Fletcher & Bullock, 2015; Tinto, 2012) and they are often not provided leadership, guidelines, or formal procedures related to online course development (Kanuka, 2001; Shaw, 2012). In addition, without the consistent presence of an instructor, online courses can feel like isolative, automated course experiences comprised of reading assignments, posting on discussion boards, and completing assessments with automatic scoring and feedback (Campbell, 2014; Chang, 2018).

Researchers have described this feeling of isolation as a lack of immediacy, which refers to the perceived physical and/or psychological closeness between people (Baker, 2010; Mehrabian, 1969, 1981; Ladyshewsky, 2013). Research has also illuminated a variety of immediacy behaviors that instructors can perform to reduce the perceived transactional distance between them and their students (Moore, 1973; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Such behaviors (described hereafter) can be verbal, nonverbal, and range from requiring relatively little time and energy (e.g., being enthusiastic when providing instruction) to requiring significant time and energy (e.g., devoting hours to meeting with students or providing substantial feedback on assignments) (Bello et al., 2020; Dixon et al., 2017; Schutt et al., 2009).

The reduction of this perceived transactional distance through such immediacy behaviors has been found to be associated with a variety of positive college student outcomes related to student motivation and learning in both face-to-face courses (Andersen, 1979; Christophel, 1990; Christophel, 1990; Edwards & Edwards, 2001; Gorham, 1988; Jensen, 1999; Roberts & Friedman, 2013) and online courses at four-year universities (Bailie, 2012; Baker, 2010; Bello et al., 2020; Campbell, 2014; Dixson et al., 2017; Schutt et al., 2017), including graduate-level coursework (Russo & Benson, 2005; Arbaugh, 2001). Though courses at four-year institutions have been the focus of the majority of such studies, similar positive relationships have also been found in three studies of online community college courses (Dilling et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2010; Pelowski, 2005).

Research Question and Purpose

In addition to focusing primarily on online courses at four-year institutions, the research on immediacy behaviors in online teaching has relied almost exclusively on quantitative methodologies. The one exception was a study conducted by Melrose and Bergeron (2006), in which the researchers conducted and analyzed interviews with healthcare graduate students. We also found studies that used contest analysis (Johnson & Card, 2007) and other observational methods (Dixson et al., 2017; Pelowski, 2005), though the findings associated with each of these approaches were coded by the researchers in order to conduct quantitative analyses. Thus, as a complement to previous research that focused on coursework at four-year institutions and in graduate school, the present study utilized semi-structured student interviews to discern the ways in which a set of instructor immediacy behaviors (i.e., a "welcome" phone call, sending personalized emails, using humor, creating videos, and sending "check-in" emails) influenced community college students' experiences and success in an online course. Our efforts were guided by our overarching research question: How did students perceive their instructor's immediacy behaviors to have influenced their overall success and persistence in the course?

The purpose of this study was to illuminate behaviors and pedagogical practices that community college students perceived their instructors had implemented to reduce the perceived distance between them and their students (and why students found such practices to be helpful or not), thereby enhancing the teaching, learning, and overall experience that this unique (and underserved) group of students have in online courses. In the following sections, we provide a review of the literature on transactional distance and immediacy, which provided the theoretical grounding for our interview protocol, data analysis, and the overarching research question that guided these efforts: In what ways do community college students perceive their instructor's immediacy behaviors to have influenced their completion of their online course? We then outline the methods we used to answer our research question, describe our findings, and discuss implications of this study for practice and future research.

Literature Review

Transactional Distance and Immediacy

While distance education scholars and professionals emphasize and value the ways in which online offerings increase access to higher education, particularly among minoritized groups (Anderson & Simpson, 2012; Moore & Kearsley, 1996), scholars and professionals are equally invested in optimizing the quality of such online offerings (Batts, 2010; Bawa, 2016; Ray, 2009). Though such optimization will depend upon the efforts of multiple parties (e.g., scholars, researchers, professionals) at multiple levels (e.g., national, institutional, departmental), the interactions and relationships between instructors and students (or lack thereof) have been found to be central to the overall quality of students' experiences in distance education (Gaytan, 2015; Harrison & Mathuews, 2022; Meyer, 2014).

One predictor of student success in online education is the prevalence, quality, and timeliness of student-instructor communication and interactions (Baker, 2010; Croxton, 2014). High quality communication between instructors and students and strong instructor-student rapport are associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including higher levels of student

motivation, improved learning, and overall course satisfaction (Andersen, 1979; Bailie, 2012; Wilson & Ryan, 2013). Scholars also see the establishment of such rapport as a rather accessible route to improving online education, one that can help instructors and departments reduce some of the more cumbersome aspects of departmental or institutional change (e.g., policy revisions, consensus gaining, budget considerations, committee work) (Glazier, 2016).

In the distance education literature, scholars have described this dimension of the instructor-student relationship in terms of transactional distance (Falloon, 2011; Moore, 1973; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Stein et al., 2005; Ustati & Hassan, 2013; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018), immediacy (Mehrabian, 1969, 1981), and immediacy behaviors that can reduce transactional distance between instructors and students (Andersen, 1979; Baker, 2010; Chang, 2018; Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Ladyshewsky, 2013). Transactional distance theory describes how the quality and intensity of the interaction between learners and the learning environment (as opposed to the quantity), and the responsiveness of instructors to learners' needs, influences student success. The theory highlights "a distance of understandings and perceptions, caused in part by the geographic distance, that has to be overcome by instructors, learners and educational organizations if effective, deliberate, planned learning is to occur" (Moore, 1991, p. 2). As this transactional distance increases, student learning, development, and the overall course experience is hindered.

Conversely, immediacy refers to a perceived physical and/or psychological closeness between people, and immediacy behaviors are verbal and nonverbal actions that, in reducing the perceived "distance" between instructors and students, help promote increased affective and cognitive learning (Andersen, 1979; Baker, 2010; Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). Examples of instructor immediacy behaviors include the sharing of personal experiences, encouraging students to talk, addressing students by name, using inclusive language, providing timely and thoughtful feedback, praising students' work, and, generally, having an overall willingness to meet, converse with, and interact with students (Bello et al., 2020; Dixson et al., 2017; Edwards & Edwards, 2001; Gorham, 1988). Instructors can also reduce transactional distance by recognizing and affirming individual students and their viewpoints, incorporating student input into course and class design, communicating availability and willingness to engage in one-to-one interactions, and using humor and self-disclosure as ways to signal accessibility to students (Baker, 2010; Gorham, 1988).

The importance of such behaviors in online settings is brought into sharp relief by the significant transactional distance that can be felt between instructors and students in online teaching and learning (Arbaugh, 2001; Baker & Woods, 2004; Croxton, 2014; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). As described in the following sections, the interviews conducted in this study were designed to discern the ways in which a set of instructor immediacy behaviors (i.e., a "welcome" phone call, sending personalized emails, using humor, creating videos, and sending "check-in" emails) influenced students' completion of an online course.

Method

Research Design and Paradigm

Participants in this study first experienced five empirically informed immediacy behaviors in an online community college course:

1. A "welcome" phone call: The community college instructors called students during the first week of the course to welcome them and ensure the student understood course expectations. The instructor explained where their office was located and welcomed them to call or come by if they had any questions (Gorham, 1988; Ladyshewsky, 2013; Legg & Wilson, 2009).
2. Personalized emails: The instructors used students' names in all individual email correspondence (Gorham, 1988).
3. Use of humor: When appropriate, the instructors used humor in email correspondence through emojis and feedback to build rapport (Arbaugh, 2001; Campbell, 2014; Gorham, 1988).
4. Instructor-created video: The instructors created videos to explain assignments (Arbaugh, 2001; Campbell, 2014, Gorham, 1988).
5. Personal "check-in" emails: The instructor sent two check-in emails to students with their current grades (in week three and week six of an eight-week semester) (Legg & Wilson, 2009).

Given the nature of our research question, the lead researcher subsequently conducted semi-structured interviews as part of this qualitative, narrative study. Narrative inquiry centers on individuals' perceptions of their lived experiences that are "extended over time, shaped by personal and social conditions" (Clandinin et al., 2007, pp. 25-26). In providing participants opportunities to relate their own stories of how they perceived and experienced the five instructor immediacy behaviors, our research efforts are grounded in social constructivism, a paradigm in which knowledge is produced by illuminating and making meaning of the complexity of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants were first asked to share their perceptions of the ways in which the five instructors immediacy behaviors influenced their decision to remain in the course. Subsequent questions provided participants opportunities to discuss each of the behaviors individually and, if appliable, share why they perceived some of the behaviors to be more positively influential for them than others. Throughout the interviews, follow-up questions were asked to allow for additional elaboration and clarification. Participants were also given an opportunity at the end of their interview to share any additional thoughts or perceptions related to their course experience that they had not yet shared.

Author Positionality

In the social constructivist paradigm, researchers recognize the ways in which their own identities and background shape and influence the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The first author of this study is a white woman and communication professor at a large community college. She attended the community college as a non-traditional student, and her background includes 15 years of experience taking, designing, and teaching online and hybrid courses. The

second author is a white man and faculty member in the field of higher education at a large research university. As part of his research agenda, he studies inclusive teaching, college student belonging, and he has conducted multiple studies related to both online learning and community college students. He has also taught college courses online, and he attended a community college as an undergraduate. The third author is a white, female faculty member in the field of higher education and administrator in research and innovation at a large research university. She has over 23 years of distance learning experiences in institution-wide leadership roles, instructional design, as well as faculty and scholar of distance learning.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample for this study was purposeful, given our need to interview students who had experienced the five instructor immediacy behaviors (described previously) in an online course. Students who had experienced these five behaviors in one of six sections of an online interpersonal communication course during the Fall 2020 semester at a large, public community college in Texas were invited to be interviewed via an email from their instructor (which had been written by the lead researcher). These six sections were taught by four instructors and consisted of the same course content, structure, textbook, and assignments. Students were offered a $25 gift card for their time, and a total of 12 students (9 female, 3 male) responded to the email and became participants in the study.

The lead researcher was not one of the four instructors of the course, but she was a member of the department that offered the course, so multiple steps were taken to help reassure participants that their identities and responses would not be identifiable to their instructors or others within the department (i.e., cameras being turned off during Zoom interviews, no collection of demographic information beyond sex, the use of pseudonyms). Demographic information for the four course instructors is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Select Instructor Demographics

	Age	Sex	Race	Years Teaching	Years Teaching Online
Instructor 1	36	Female	White	10	10
Instructor 2	49	Female	White	10	6
Instructor 3	52	Female	White	10	10
Instructor 4	65	Male	White	33	12

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Participants' responses were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the lead researcher using constant comparison as well as an open, axial, and selective coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Such coding facilitates "a cyclical and evolving data loop in which the researcher interacts, is constantly comparing data and applying data reduction, and consolidation techniques" (Williams & Moser, 2019, p. 47). In so doing, themes were identified and interpreted, which were guided by the study's theoretical framing and research question. To help ensure trustworthiness, reflexive journaling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Janesick, 2011) and member checking (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006) were employed throughout the data collection and analysis processes.

Findings

Perceptions of the Relationship Between Immediacy Behaviors and Course Completion

Our research question focused on students' perceptions of how their instructor's immediacy behaviors helped them persist to the completion of an online interpersonal communication course. These five immediacy behaviors included instructors making a "welcome" phone call, sending personalized emails, using humor, creating videos (recordings of lectures and assignment overviews), and sending "check-in" emails. Themes that emerged in students' discussions of these immediacy behaviors are summarized in Table 2 and described in greater detail in the following sections (including student quotations via pseudonyms).

Table 2

Students' Perceptions of How Instructor Immediacy Behaviors Influenced Their Course Experience and Completion

Instructor Immediacy Behavior	Themes
Making "Welcome" Phone Calls	• Helped established a more personal relationship with their instructor • Helped students feel more connected to their instructor/less on their own • Provided students a better sense of the course experience that was ahead of them • Humanized the instructor and made them more approachable • Opened lines of communication early in the semester
Sending Personalized Emails	• Made students feel seen and valued in their online course • Set a personal tone that made students feel comfortable to reach out to their instructor • Made the instructor seem more personable and caring

	• Increased students' desire to pay attention, engage, and be successful in the course
Using Humor	• Made the instructor more relatable • Made the course experience more relaxing, comfortable, positive • Increased students desire and ability to attend, pay attention, participate, "open up," and retain what they were learning • Made the instructor easier to approach when students were struggling • The use of emojis helped students feel that the instructor understood them
Creating Videos	• Provided students multiple ways of understanding assignments (i.e., written instructions and video instructions provided by the instructor) • Provided the instructor additional opportunities to talk about themselves and help students get to know them better • Increased students' understanding of the material • Helped students feel less isolated/on their own • Enabled students to access assignment instructions more than once/freely • Enabled students to take notes at their convenience
Sending Check-in Emails	• Provided students renewed sense of purpose and motivation • Made students feel that the instructor cares • Prompted students to improve/modify their efforts (e.g., overcoming procrastination or struggling with the course in other ways) • Enabled the instructor to provide individualized guidance and support • Enabled the instructor to provide individualized adaptation (e.g., when students became sick) • Created a channel through which students could ask the instructor questions • Made students more desirous to stay in the course (when told by the instructor in a check-in email that they were doing well in the course)

Making "Welcome" Phone Calls

Students shared a variety of ways in which their instructor's welcome phone call had a positive influence throughout the semester and helped them complete the course. The phone call was unexpected, catching them off guard, as it was not something they experienced regularly. It left an impression and caused them to perceive a more personal relationship. The call made students feel more connected and less isolated. It gave them a better sense of what was going on with the course. Some examples of these connections were shared by the students.

Stephen said that "the phone call especially helped [me] to be a little bit more connected because I am online." Stephanie shared that the phone call "helps you to develop a more personal relationship and lets us know our instructor. They're human too, you know?" Jacob discussed how getting the phone call from his instructor was one of the most influential immediacy behaviors, highlighting how his instructor

> actually got to talk to us one-on-one, instead of it being them introducing themselves over the whole classroom, I guess. Because you were able to talk to her one-on-one, and I feel like that's a lot. It gives you a better chance to communicate and get to know your instructor as well as them getting to know you. So, I got to know who I was attending class for.

Kathleen shared similar sentiments and went further, suggesting that such phone calls should be a norm:

> I definitely think I need to hear [the instructor's] voice. So, I know that you're my teacher and stuff like that, so I can get a little bit personal and like be able to text you. I think that'd be good for people, too.

Students shared how making such connections early in the semester opened the line of communication, made the instructor seem more approachable, and made it easier for them to reach out when they needed help. In these ways, such phone calls helped the instructors reduce the transactional distance between them and their students (early on in the semester, but with semester-long effects).

Sending Personalized Emails

Students also discussed ways in which personalized email from instructors influenced their experience and completion of the course. Stephen described how helpful it was to have the instructor call him by his name, which is something he does when he interacts with customers at his job:

> Something I've learned after guest interaction is that I try to at least get somebody's name so I can have that sort of connection. And even though it's used over email, reading that kind of feels like she actually took the time to get to know the student a little bit more, even know my name and be familiar with my question enough to respond.

Kathleen shared that some teachers do not reach out at all in online courses, and that this makes it harder to go through the course; however, personalized emails felt like an opening in the beginning of the semester to make communicating more comfortable:

> So, [some instructors] give you one email in the beginning and that's it. So, you don't know, "if I email him, is he going to reply? Is he going to tell me this?" But when you get to know them at the beginning, I think it's easier for kids to email and text and be like, "Hey, I need help."

She also said that she liked it when teachers used students' names when emailing, and not just "student." She shared how this made her instructor more personable, and "it seems as though she cared, I guess is what I am trying to say. So that was actually very helpful." Stephanie also discussed how the emails helped her feel noticed and strengthened her relationship with the instructor:

> I think using my name because, you know, in these online classes and stuff, it's hard to feel like they notice you, but when they call you by name it makes it feel more personal, you know? And it's easier to listen to somebody I feel that knows me, than to just some random person, you know?

Overall, students perceived the instructor as more caring when the instructor took the extra time to use their name in email correspondence, and they felt more of a personal connection with the instructor. They perceived this connection as the instructor "knowing" them more, resulting in them wanting to pay more attention and be more engaged and successful in the course.

Using Humor

In addition to the kinds of communication that instructors initiated via phone and email, students described how their instructor's use of humor influenced their experience and completion of the course. Marcie answered, "for sure," when asked if the immediacy behaviors influenced her decision to remain in the course, and she described how the use of humor and emojis "helped make things a little more relaxing." Zackery similarly described how instructor rapport influenced his persistence in the course as he described "being more comfortable" and "having a positive atmosphere" created by the instructor. Stephanie shared that the use of humor.

> gives you a sense that they're more there. Not just because they have to be, you know, adding a little humor and jokes and stuff like that. It just makes you want to be there. It just helps me open up personally.

Similarly, Chrishelle described how the use of humor can make instructors easier to pay attention to and helped her retain what they were teaching her:

> It's just nice to have a fun teacher because then they interact more, and it's harder to listen to someone just talk and not really explain. But mine who use humor, I feel like they explain more because they would add the humor in and they'd be like, "oh, that's funny." And I remember it because you said that.

Melanie explained how the instructor's use of humor made her more relatable, which influenced her success in the course:

> She treated us as if like, "oh hey, you're struggling a little bit? They need a little bit of help." And she was lighthearted about it. She did have jokes. She didn't make us feel dumb about asking for help, or she was like, "there's no stupid questions," basically, and that helped a lot.

In addition to the use of humor through jokes and other verbal means, students also discussed how emojis (a nonverbal immediacy behavior) had a positive influence on their course experience and persistence. When explaining which of the immediacy behaviors influenced her success the most, Kathleen said, "probably using the humor through emojis, because I know we're all the little young'uns using texting emojis and everything. So, it kind of felt like she understood us, I guess." Similarly, Whitley perceived that the younger students probably found emojis beneficial, but she did not as much: "It's fun and maybe once or twice, but I wouldn't get carried away with the emojis just because . . . I'm a little bit older in college."

Overall, students generally perceived the instructor to be more relatable when they used humor. They perceived that an instructor who was more relatable was easier to approach when struggling with something, which played a significant role in their engagement, overall success, and persistence in the course.

Creating Videos

Instructors also created recorded lectures and videos to describe assignments, which students found to be helpful in a few ways. Jacob described how his instructor was able to "explain [the assignment] to us a bit better, and she made sure to include herself and a little bit about her in that. So, I thought that was really cool because I've never had a professor do that." Misty shared how the instructor videos increased her understanding of the material and helped her to feel less isolated:

> Whenever she created videos to explain an assignment, it was easier for me to understand a lot of the times just because listening to it and her explain all the assignment, I think it was more like, it doesn't make you feel like you're just at home . . .. Like you actually get to see somebody. It's not like you're just reading and doing it on your own.

Melanie appreciated instructor videos for similar reasons, but also found it helpful to be able to access assignment explanations at more than just one point in time:

> She would actually do a video lecture and it was so great because I've had the teachers that they're just like, "well, okay, here's [the textbook]. And here's what you're supposed to do." And they explain everything and they just kind of expect you to take it on yourself and be like, "Oh, okay." And I understand it's, like, an element of college, but it helps to have the video lecture from her where we could just watch it.

Chrishelle also discussed how she "can go back and watch [the video] if I miss something," and Misty perceived that "it was nice to be able to refer back to [recordings] because it was already videoed.

Overall, students perceived the instructor videos as contributing positively to their success and course completion because it helped them to feel less isolated and as if they just needed to figure things out on their own. They appreciated the assistance in explaining assignments and getting personal examples from the instructor, who they saw as a real person from the videos. Students agreed that being able to go back and access the instructor videos anytime throughout the course was beneficial, and they perceived that it helped them do well on assignments. They shared that having the ability to take notes at their convenience by watching the videos was invaluable to their grade and their success in the course.

Sending Check-in Emails

Finally, students discussed how instructors sending check-in emails during weeks three and six helped them persist in the course. Jacob enjoyed that his instructor would send motivating messages: "She would message us randomly, and she would be like, 'Hey you're doing really good in the course.' I thought that was very neat, I've never had professors do any of what she did, honestly." Jacob also shared that, in past semesters, he had to withdraw from his courses because of some "stuff" he was going through at home. He reflected on the check-in emails from his instructor fondly as he shared, "Whenever I got that [email], I thought that was very, very nice, because I've really never had a professor do that, so I do remember all of that." Jacob also shared that, at times, students struggle to remain motivated in the course, and the instructor's check-in email was the biggest influence on him: "I just feel like [the check-in emails were] the biggest [immediacy behavior] for me, honestly, because you really never know

what someone's going through at home and you don't know if they just needed like that extra push, you know?" Kylie added:

> I think the check-in email on the third and sixth week was nice. It's like, she actually cares . . .. Not many teachers do that, especially online. I've taken a lot of online courses over the past year, especially. So, yeah, I think they did very well keeping us engaged.

Crishelle described getting the emails as being motivational in ways that made her want to stay in the class:

> Just them emailing, like, "oh, you're making this grade," or, "you're doing such a good job." Just made me like, "okay, I'm doing good in this class, so I want to stay in the class" and then they acknowledge that. I keep close track with my grades. It's just nice to have them acknowledge it.

Marcie agreed that the instructor's check-in emails helped her push through the class at a difficult point:

> I check my grade pretty frequently, but getting those check-in emails were also great too because if my teachers [saw] something we could improve on, they also included that, or just the words of encouragement was great. It helped push me through the class when I was kind of procrastinating, and if there was something I could improve upon, that was just a great reminder that I could keep going back to and referring to whenever I was doing my next assignment.

Similarly, Melanie said she got sick with COVID-19 during the course, and those check-in emails helped pave the way for her and her instructor to navigate that together, which left a positive impression on her:

> She was like, we can pause it for you. You can come back later. And then afterwards she still was checking up on me just to make sure I was okay. Did I get the content? Did I need extra time? And it was so relieving to have a professor just email, just to check up on you, just to make sure you were doing okay. Luckily, I was able to get through it, but I was so sick, and she was the only one professor out of all of the ones that I had that semester that actually did check up on me after I told them, "Hey, I have COVID. I don't know how sick I'm going to get, but I'm going to try to do the work." She's the one that said we can move this over, and we can pause this for you just to make sure you don't fail the course.

Marcie also shared how important the check-in emails were for her, given that she needed to travel frequently:

> I'm actually a performer, so I had to have online classes because I'm not always in town. So, [the check-in emails] just made it to where I could relax a little bit more in the class, and I wasn't as stressed out. The instructor sending check-in emails with me made it easier for me to know how I was doing in the class and what I could improve on.

Kathleen also found the check-in emails to be an opportunity to ask questions about course content: "That was actually very resourceful . . . the check-in emails helped a lot. Like, 'Oh, I don't understand this, can you help me out?' It was very helpful."

Many students appreciated the emails as they gave them a sense of how they were doing and the areas where they could improve. Students explained that it was easy to respond to the email to get clarification from their instructor, helping them be more successful in their coursework. The check-in emails left a memorable impression, as it was not something that was common among the instructors they had previously. Students perceived that the check-in emails showed that the instructor cared about them and their well-being, even outside of the course. Many of them explained that it gave them an extra "push" when they needed motivation and helped push them through to the end.

Study Limitations

Before discussing the implications of these findings, a few limitations to the study should be noted. This study focused on a particular set of five immediacy behaviors, which do not represent an exhaustive list, thus limiting the implications of the study to those particular behaviors. Similarly, students in this study experienced these behaviors in conjunction with the same course (albeit different sections) at the same college. Therefore, the transferability of these findings will vary in terms of how they apply to students who (a) attend different types of institutions, (b) take courses in other fields and disciplines, and (c) have different instructors of diverse identities and backgrounds who vary in the ways they perform these immediacy behaviors.

We also acknowledge that, in asking students to share their perceptions of these immediacy behaviors, we were collecting a form of self-reported data that can be influenced by social desirability bias (i.e., the desire to present oneself favorably in the interview setting), the extent to which students were able to remember these five behaviors, and the extent to which students were able to remember how they experienced these behaviors at that time and thereafter. It should also be noted that these students were describing a course that they took in the fall of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though this represents a time in which immediacy behaviors would presumably be all the more important and, therefore, an important time in which to study how students experience them, the ways in which students experience instructor immediacy behaviors may differ in non-pandemic times.

Discussion

Our research question examined community college students' perceptions of how their instructor's immediacy behaviors helped them experience success (in various forms) and persist to completing an interpersonal communication course. The findings of this qualitative study align closely with previous studies of immediacy behaviors in college teaching, the majority of which have been quantitative analyses that focused primarily on students at four-year institutions (including graduate school) that generally do not experience the kinds of struggles and limited resources that community colleges and their students experience. While the interviews conducted in this study provided additional evidence that community college students appreciate

immediacy behaviors, and that such behaviors help them persist in their coursework, the interviews also provided participants in this study opportunities to elaborate on why and how these behaviors are helpful to this vulnerable group of college students, providing researchers and instructors deeper insight into how immediacy behaviors decrease the "distance" between instructors and students and promote student success and persistence.

Overall, participants perceived that the check-in emails and the phone call from their instructor benefited them the most. This perception aligns with Moore's transactional distance theory (Moore, 1973; Moore & Kearsley, 1996) in that, by reducing the transactional distance between student and instructor, students feel less isolated. Similarly, past research shows that early contact (as with the "welcome" phone calls in this study) has the potential advantage of improving retention (Legg & Wilson, 2009). This aligns with research findings that online courses with high levels of interactivity lead to higher levels of student motivation, improved learning outcomes, and satisfaction (Bailie, 2012), and that student-instructor dialogue is essential for reducing transactional distance in online courses (Moore, 1973; Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

Most participants agreed that one-on-one interactions with the instructor were beneficial. Instructors taking time out of their day to make phone calls gave the personal touch that they perceived to be lacking in online classes. Students perceived a personal connection with the instructor, and several commented that they wanted to do better in and remain in the class when they had even a small personal connection with the instructor. Through the use of such instructor immediacy behaviors, the level and quality of interactions increased, enabling these students and instructors to reduce the psychological and perceived physical distance between them (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008; Tinto, 2012).

When describing how students perceived the instructor after receiving personalized emails, students used words like "caring," "helpful," "connecting," and "responsive." By taking the extra time to use the students' name, the instructor showed that they were open to communicating with them and made students feel more comfortable reaching out. The findings correlate with research done by Gorham (1998) who studied verbal immediacy behaviors that include addressing students by name, using inclusive language (referring to class as "our" class or what "we" are doing), and praising students' work, providing online instructors a relatively low-effort way of making a positive impact on their students' course experience and persistence.

Students also perceived that the use of instructor humor and rapport-building made the atmosphere of the online course more fun and relaxed. The relaxed interaction allowed the students to see the "humanness" of the instructor (Gorham, 1988, p. 52) and that the instructor enjoyed what they were doing, which helped students want to remain in the course. Participants made comments relating to how the instructor was lighthearted, could joke around, and understood them. Research has found that such rapport between students and instructors leads to numerous positive student outcomes, including attitudes toward the instructor and course, student motivation, and perceived learning (Andersen, 1979; Wilson & Ryan, 2013). This aligns with Glazier's (2016) observation that rapport building is an effort that, on the one hand, leads to significant improvements in student success and, on the other hand, does not require budget requests, policy revisions, committee meetings, or other more time-intensive efforts at the organizational level.

Finally, students found the instructor videos informative, accessible, and helpful in terms of helping students get to know their instructor and feel less isolated. Such videos have been found to be especially important to students in asynchronous online courses (Gaytan, 2015), providing instructors opportunities to be expressive, smile at the class, and be at ease in their presentation (Gorham, 1988). Such efforts decreased the perceived transactional distance between students and their instructors and helped students develop a similar sense of ease, which, in turn, strengthened their desire to persist and their confidence in completing the course.

Recommendations for Practice

Whether academic programs at community colleges offer students a blend of online and in-person coursework, and particularly if programs offer online courses exclusively (see Shea & Bidjerano, 2018 for an analysis of such blends), it will be important that programs and instructors are invested in optimizing the online learning experiences of their students. A key dimension of their students' experience will be the extent to which transactional distance (Falloon, 2011; Moore, 1973; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Stein et al., 2005; Ustati & Hassan, 2013; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018) can be minimized through instructor immediacy behaviors (Andersen, 1979; Baker, 2010; Chang, 2018; Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Ladyshewsky, 2013), a subset of which were the focus of this study. Grounded in students' descriptions of how such behaviors enhanced their overall learning and success, the findings of this study provide unique insights into minimizing such "distance" between students and their instructors.

Creating Consistent and Structured Opportunities to Communicate with Students

As part of the development of a syllabus, online instructors should consider creating a schedule for communicating with students throughout the semester. In this study, students shared that they felt more connected in online courses when the instructor was actively involved and present in the course. In line with Croxton's (2014) assertion that one of the greatest predictors of student satisfaction and success is the prevalence, quality, and timeliness of student–instructor communication, creating a schedule for communication with students at the beginning of the semester (and augmenting it as needed throughout the semester) can be a simple way for instructors to ensure that such interactions are central in their course. In addition, providing such a schedule in the syllabus and talking about it with students at the beginning of the semester (along with why it is there and why the instructor values such interactions) sends an important signal to students and can have a positive influence on the overall tone of the course.

Furthermore, the messages instructors share throughout the semester should be thoughtful, supportive, and demonstrate genuine care for their students (Bailie, 2012; Gorham, 1988). It is also important for instructors to maintain consistent contact, meaning that instructors need to respond to learner-initiated communication and provide feedback on assignments in a timely manner (Dennen & Darabi, 2007). In this study, such communication (e.g., personal check-in emails, "welcome" phone calls, and instructor videos) helped learners and instructors reduce the psychological and perceived physical distance between them, which, in turn, motivated students to be successful and persist in the course (Andersen, 1979; Chang, 2018; Mehrabian, 1969, 1981; Moore, 1973; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018).

Of course, such immediacy behaviors may not come naturally to everyone. Some instructors may not be comfortable with making phone calls to students, using humor in their courses, or teaching in ways that differ from the ways they were taught as students. In this sense,

the effective implementation of immediacy behaviors in online teaching may require some experimentation and refinement. Trying new things can take time and/or cause discomfort, but as immediacy behaviors become the norm in one's teaching, they can not only increase student learning, but save instructor time as well (e.g., students experience less struggles, questions, and confusion, requiring less instructor assistance outside of class).

Providing Online Instructors with Online-Specific Instructional Training

Online instructors' efficacy in decreasing transactional distance through immediacy behaviors can depend significantly on the training they receive (Ustati & Hassan, 2013). Such training and related instructional development opportunities will need to focus not only on the basics of course delivery and technical areas (i.e., the minimum necessary to get a course up and running), but best teaching practices as well (Batts et al., 2010). Further, scholars emphasize that online faculty need training that would allow them to gain a better understanding of a wide range of online instructional best practices, including those that can reduce the transactional distance between them and their students (e.g., high quantity and quality of instruction, recorded videos; various forms of faculty-student and student–student interactions, prompt and high-quality feedback) (Croxton, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). Given that many immediacy behaviors are not very time- and effort-intensive, even a small amount of training on such practices (e.g., one 90-minute session) can have a significant, positive impact on instruction and student learning (Bawa, 2016), perhaps representing a starting point for programs, departments, colleges, and institutions establishing infrastructure to provide better and more continual resources and developmental opportunities (Jackson et al., 2010; Pagliari et al., 2009).

Recommendations for Future Research

In our review of the literature, we found only three studies that focused on immediacy behaviors in online community college courses (Dilling et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2010; Pelowski, 2005) and only one study that utilized qualitative methods (i.e., among graduate students; Melrose & Bergeron, 2006). As higher education shifts online (e.g., because of the COVD-19 pandemic), it will become increasingly important to discern to the kinds of immediacy behaviors that decrease the transactional distance between instructors and students, distances that have the potential to likewise increase as part of such trends (Sevnarayan, 2022). This will be especially important within community college contexts, given that minoritized students are often overrepresented in community colleges (Bahr et al., 2017, 2022) and the ways in which community colleges, their students, and their instructors are often on the margins in terms of resources (Yuen, 2020) and scholarly attention (Haynes & Zhang, 2023).

In addition to discerning the kinds of behaviors that most effectively enhance community college students' learning and overall experience (e.g., through quantitative research), qualitative studies will continue to be an important focus, illuminating *why* and *how* immediacy behaviors have an influence on students. This will be especially important as (a) new educational technologies are developed to meet the needs and wants of an increasingly online society and (b) instructors become more open to utilizing educational technologies that already exist. A few behaviors were the focus of the present study, but many more exist, and many other opportunities and means through which immediacy can be pursued will be developed going forward.

Finally, building on the work of Dilling et al. (2020), future qualitative studies could compare the experience of students in different sections of the same course who experienced the presence and absence of immediacy behaviors. While most of the students in this study felt that their instructor's immediacy behaviors did influence their completion of the course, two students commented that they were going to remain in the course "no matter what." This would suggest that, for some students, immediacy may not be necessary for their course completion; however, students who experience the presence and absence of immediacy behaviors (regardless of whether they would ever consider dropping the course to be a viable option) would presumably have different experiences, levels of overall satisfaction, and learning. Whereas Dilling and colleagues (2020) found that instructor presence could be equally strong in both in-person and online environments, qualitative studies comparing the presence and absence of instructor immediacy would help us better understand why and how the course experience varies for students who experience larger and smaller transactional distances between themselves and their instructors.

Conclusion

Although students can feel isolated in online courses, the findings of this study illuminate how instructors can reduce the transactional distance between themselves and their students by making "welcome" phone calls, sending personalized emails, using humor, creating videos to present content and describe assignments, and sending check-in emails throughout the academic term. Instructor engagement in such immediacy behaviors is especially important at community colleges, where community and locality are central to the institutional mission, and where there is often a lack of the resources necessary to enhance online teaching, learning, and community in other ways. In this study, students described how a set of immediacy behaviors had a positive influence on their course (e.g., making the experience more personable, positive, comfortable, clear, accessible, and, ultimately, one in which they can feel that their instructor cares about them and their success), thus increasing their desire and ability to complete the course.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of community colleges investing in online-specific instructor training that focuses on instructional best practices, including immediacy behaviors, as well as the need for instructors to be willing to experiment with and refine these behaviors in their teaching. Given that the research on immediacy behaviors in college coursework has focused primarily on four-year institutions and relied almost exclusively on quantitative analytic approaches, future qualitative studies within community college contexts represent a promising area of future research. Indeed, in an increasingly online world, and one that instructors and students are still learning how to navigate, such efforts on the part of researchers and instructors stand to enhance the teaching that community college instructors provide and the learning that community college students experience.

Statements

This study was approved by the [institution name temporarily withheld for peer review purposes] Institutional Review Board.

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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