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Emotional Intelligence: An Examination as Related to Communication and Small Group Formation
Abby M. Brooks, Georgia Southern University

Forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning are the widely recognized group development stages outlined by Bruce W. Tuckman (Beebe & Masterson, 2010).

I am in my eighth year teaching Georgia Southern University's Small Group Communication class (COMS 3332), and for the past several years I have had the undergraduates work in the same groups of 5-6 students the entire semester. Because, in theory, I have fully formed groups after 16 weeks of interaction, I kept thinking—or perhaps hearing my former professor Dr. Levine’s voice in my head—there has to be a research project here somewhere. Last year it hit me: emotional intelligence! And so, I began to wonder: How, if at all, does Emotional Intelligence impact a small group’s development?

At first, I was surprised to find no studies answering my question, but then I realized why: because it is difficult, perhaps tedious, to collect data from fully formed groups. The difficulty lies in being able to capture data from actual, fully formed groups. It is unlikely that a lab or experimentally simulated group, having worked together for a matter of minutes or hours, is fully developed; it takes time for a collection of individuals to form into a fully functioning group (Beebe & Masterson, 2010). This paper will outline why and how I am attempting to answer the question of how, if at all, Emotional Intelligence impacts group development by providing a brief overview of literature and methods as I continue to collect data for this project.

So first, back to Tuckman and group development. Engleberg and Wynn (2007) described that just as people move through stages of maturity from childhood through adulthood, most groups go through recognizable stages of development. One of the most widely recognized theories of group development, as mentioned above, is Tuckman’s stages for group development. Those five stages outlined in the 1977 article by Tuckman and Jensen are forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning.

During the forming stage, group members tend to compare their individual goals with the overall group goals (Beebe & Masterson, 2010). The group participants generally use surface-level communication that is often plagued with care and restraint. Once group mates begin to move past the caution and this introduction to one another, groups mature to the storming stage.

The storming stage begins as group members are more comfortable with each other and are truly communicating, allowing their authentic personalities and needs to be revealed (Beebe & Masterson, 2010). Although group members may wish to refrain from this stage and instead maintain an element of decorum, it is important to group development as group members are testing their communication efforts and effectiveness (Beebe & Masterson, 2010). This stage also allows for group mates to manage conflict and leads to the norming stage.

The norming stage of group development occurs in the life of a group when group mates can move from storming into a comfortable stage of expression and can actively discuss tasks and social matters in a way that they feel supported (Beebe & Masterson, 2010). During this stage, group members generally feel that their personal views will be welcomed and warranted rather than shunned or berated. Group members also take on comfortable roles (whether task, social, or individual), and the group falls into a
pattern of norms/habits. This comfortable and active communication allows the life of the group to mature into the performing stage.

The performing stage takes place when the group members are functioning to accomplish their task and meeting the common group goals (Beebe & Masterson, 2010). In this stage, individual roles and responsibilities might change to best accomplish tasks, and the group is thought to be working as the clichéd “on all cylinders.” When group goals are met, work tasks are completed, time has run out, or the group members decide to go their own ways, the group enters the final developmental stage, according to Tuckman: adjourning. Interestingly, this fifth and final stage was added to Tuckman’s development almost a decade after he published his initial four stages (forming, storming, norming, and performing). This addition after time, therefore, lends credence to the importance of recognizing that breaking apart impacts group participants.

The adjourning stage is the “breakup” stage as group work is complete and groups tend to break apart. In this adjourning stage, group members can feel a sense of loss as they recognize that the life of the group is over (Beebe & Masterson, 2010). This adjourning stage extends in a way with individuals as the lessons, habits, and roles learned while working as part of the group can be carried on by individuals to their next group experience. Understanding this development is crucial from the supervisor/teacher perspective and toward further understanding what forces, both controllable and uncontrollable, can help group administrators best manage the structure of groups. One such observable variable is that of Emotional Intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence has been contrasted with Cognitive Intelligence (Goleman, 1998), and it has been argued that to fully understand this concept, Emotional Intelligence should be treated as a set of abilities, as a skill at which an individual can be competent and even proficient, not just an inborn trait that cannot be flexed.

Emotional Intelligence, defined by Goleman (1998), is the “capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships” (p. 317). Kafetsios and Zampetakis (2007) wrote that “at a theoretical level Emotional Intelligence reflects the extent to which a person attends to, processes, and acts upon information of an emotional nature intra-personally and inter-personally” (p. 713). And Trenham and Jenson (2013) simply stated that Emotional Intelligence is the ability to process emotional information.

Important to this research work, Emotional Intelligence has been linked to working in small groups both for task communication and social-emotional communication (Engleberg & Wynn, 2007). Task communication has been described as the communication that occurs between group members with regard to group goals, processes, and functions (Beebe & Masterson, 2010). For example, task communication occurs when group members talk about selecting a leader or where the group will hold its next meeting. Social-emotional communication, on the other hand, occurs between group members to allow individuals to get to know each other as people, not just work or task, partners, and to have a social element, to maintain positive working relationships (Beebe & Masterson, 2010). Examples of this type of communication include the discussion of weekend plans, favorite foods, and interests outside the group’s work. Both types of communication are deemed important for overall group success (Beebe & Masterson, 2010), as group members must be satisfied from both work and social perspectives. Engleberg and Wynn (2007) link Emotional Intelligence to group work through the phenomenon of communication by illustrating
five basic competencies important to group work: self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills.

The first competency outlined by Engleberg and Wynn is self-awareness. When working in groups, this self-awareness is seen when group members can “recognize how they are feeling at the moment and use that knowledge to guide the way they communicate and make decisions” (Engleberg & Wynn, 2007, p. 285). If a member of a group is self-aware, for example, he or she will recognize if his or her patience is running thin or if he or she is using harsh paralanguage when communicating with group mates and make necessary changes to be a more competent communicator. This self-awareness, or recognition, is important in the understanding of one’s actions and can lead to self-regulation.

Engleberg and Wynn (2007) thereby described self-regulation as “when group members handle their emotions responsibly, delay personal gratification to pursue group goals, and recover well from emotional distress” (p. 285). Being able to self-regulate one’s actions does not mean ignoring or repressing emotions but understanding emotions to best work through situations. For example, a group member named Ben should understand that instead of getting angry and yelling or suppressing anger and moving on when a group mate interrupts him, Ben should acknowledge his feeling and share with the group mate that the interruptions frustrate him and ask the interrupter not to continue the interruptions. To effectively have self-awareness and to be able to self-regulate, individuals must be motivated to acknowledge the efforts at taking steps, but, individuals working in a group should also have motivation to act as an effective group mate. Engleberg and Wynn explained this competency as self-motivation.

Self-motivation, as explained by Engleberg and Wynn (2007), is “when group members tap their emotional needs as a source of motivation. These feelings often enable members to be resourceful, take initiative, strive to improve group performance, and persevere in the face of setbacks and frustrations. When emotions cloud your ability to move ahead, motivation provides the energy to continue” (p. 285). Self-motivation is the drive that encourages group mates to continue with a project when a situation might not be going their way. For example, if Megan has been working with a group for four weeks but the group is facing challenges such as not getting correct information from an organization, Megan must reach to her self-motivation to find new ways of facilitating tasks. Self-motivation also comes into play when a group member faces challenges with regard to the social-emotional communication with group mates.

At times, group mates must flex their competency of empathy when working with a group. Empathy, with regard to Emotional Intelligence and working with a group is when group members with emotional intelligence accurately sense what other members are feeling and are able to understand and establish rapport with diverse group members. Such members analyze their relationships and emotions objectively and then have the sensitivity to respond appropriately and helpfully. (Engleberg & Wynn, 2007, p. 285)

For example, if Luke has been working with a group and he recognizes that his group mate Maddy is feeling out of place because she is the only non-Communication major or if he recognizes that Baker is feeling overwhelmed by the group’s work load, Luke might engage Maddy in conversation to help her feel like part of the group, or offer to be a sounding-board for Baker to talk through some of his concerns about his work commitments.
Being able to engage group mates in this way emphasizes that to be a competent group mate, whether from this social-emotional perspective, or a task perspective, group mates must be competent with social skills. Engleberg and Wynn identify this competency of social skills as the fifth competency of Emotional Intelligence when working with groups. Social skills have a foundation in communication (Engleberg & Wynn, 2007). “Emotionally intelligent group members can read social situations and choose effective communication strategies that help them cooperate, persuade, negotiate, and lead others. These strategies require a variety of communication skills including openness, assertiveness, listening, constructive criticism, and group communication competencies” (p. 285). As outlined above, social-emotional communication and task communication are both critical to a group’s success. Largely depicted as the competency of social skills, communication plays a critical role in one’s Emotional Intelligence. For example, regardless of whether the subject of a group discussion is task- or social-based, Brody must have effective listening skills to have positive social skills and therefore function in the small-group environment.

Thus, Emotional Intelligence competencies seemingly play a critical role in the overall communication and functionality of a group. I consequently argue that the construct of Emotional Intelligence plays an instrumental role in the lifespan of a group, known as group development, as well as an individual’s want to participate in a group.

Based on the information outlined above, with regard to groups and emotional intelligence, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How, if at all, does emotional intelligence impact a small group’s development?

RQ2: How, if at all, does a group member’s Emotional intelligence influence his or her willingness to work with a group?

RQ3: How, if at all, does a group member’s perceived willingness to work with a group impact group development?

To answer these queries and complete this research project, volunteer participants, at least 18 years old, who have been enrolled in a college class in which they have worked in the same group over the course of a semester (16 weeks) will be surveyed. A limitation to this work is that less than 30 participants, working in five separate groups, will be collected each spring semester. This is a limitation as the data collection will take time to facilitate; yet, the advantage is the research can oversee the development of the groups. The survey measure will explore: communication competence, emotional intelligence, group formation and the individual’s willingness to work in groups.

In summary, as described by Kelly and Barsade (2001) “emotions are alive, well and living in groups. We can surmise therefore that it is important to understand how formation and emotional intelligence impact group work and group satisfaction” (p. 121). This research process will take time to facilitate, but the perceived impacts for classrooms, boardrooms, and workrooms will be worth the time and dedication to the process.
References


Faculty Usage and Opinions of Learning Management Systems
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Introduction

Although technology is increasingly gaining influence in the classroom, few technological implementations possess the ability to completely alter the educational market more than the Learning Management System (LMS). Similar to the Content Management Systems (CMS) that helped usher in the Web 2.0 era through services such as Facebook, WordPress, and a plethora of other dynamic web content, an LMS allows for students and instructors to facilitate the learning process free of physical (and often chronemic) barriers and restraints. The LMS is a pivotal component of twenty-first-century distance education, allowing students to participate in online classes without ever meeting in person.

However, the LMS also has a role in the more traditional classroom environment, as well. Combining with the traditional setting to create a “blended” course experience, an instructor can engage with students in a class during scheduled lecture times while enabling quizzes, discussions, readings, and assessment feedback outside the classroom through an institutional portal. The draw of the LMS is that the faculty member can set up a customized course module that is web accessible without having to learn or type a single line of code.

Although the LMS is a valuable asset, it needs careful planning and implementation to be used effectively. Although an LMS offers unparalleled access to information, both students and instructors agree that using an LMS to replace “teaching” in a traditional-style class would hinder the learning process (Lopes, 2008). Still, the LMS offers customization, access to multimedia materials, and the ability for students and faculty to complete classroom tasks outside of the few normal allotted hours the course meets every week.

This freedom and empowerment of faculty and students is perhaps the biggest reason why the LMS market was projected to become a $49.6 billion market in 2014 (Ambient Insight Research, 2011). The emergence of several key players in the market, including Blackboard, Desire2Learn, Edmodo, SumTotal Systems, Cornerstone, Schoology, and Moodle (the largest open-source option), has provided a variety of platforms, some purchased for use with and deployed to millions of students. The advancement of mobile web access has even allowed for the birth of MLearning (mobile learning), requiring LMS developers to ensure that their content is easily accessible on smartphones and tablets (Nicolau & Popescu, 2013).

As institutions acquire contracts to offer these platforms to their constituents (many of whom use them on a voluntary basis), the need for research into adoption motivation and analysis becomes clear. Although the majority of LMS research has focused on the student side of the equation (ability to learn, accomplish outcomes, etc.), a situational analysis leads to the conclusion that it is just as necessary (if not more) to closely examine the motivations behind the rate of faculty LMS adoption, particularly in blended learning environments. Deploying an LMS is a complex process, fraught with many opportunities for missteps, requiring careful planning, and absolutely hinging on proper and effective communication (Davis, Surajballi, Smith, & Rice, 2014). Therefore, it is vital that the research allows for a unifying theory to arise.
Literature Review

Much research has been conducted to evaluate the impact of an LMS in the day-to-day interaction from the perspective of the student. Studies range from usability and accessibility surveys to live A/B testing. At first glance, this research emphasis seems to make sense: student users would naturally outnumber faculty users, the learning outcomes in higher education are student-oriented, and students are often viewed as possessing the “customer” role in higher education. Therefore, it is important to view the student-centered LMS research, even when wanting to examine the subject from a faculty-oriented perspective.

In one study, it was determined that students are more critical of an LMS when browsing and examining it through a smartphone interface than through a regular computer paradigm (Cho, Jung, & Im, 2014). This is also supported by research that indicates that a larger screen helps to better facilitate the process for the learner (Hong-Ren & Hui-Ling, 2010).

Research is also being conducted on students outside the United States. One study surveyed undergraduate students on their intent to continuously use an LMS at the Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Science in Tanzania (Lwoga, 2014). The study found that user satisfaction hinged on the perception of quality, both of the instructor and the system itself. The study touts itself as being “of value to higher learning institutions management, e-learning systems designers and providers, and instructors when planning and implementing e-learning projects in the region.” Another study in Tanzania included faculty, but the researchers made student participation mandatory and only surveyed student satisfaction following the implementation (Kilewo et al., 2014). These post-study, student-only surveys were what allowed the researchers to conclude that LMSs were a “useful and efficient” tool for executing portions of coursework in an online capacity.

Another study focused on the role of the LMS in student success (Stamm, 2014). One of the key benefits of an online system is the ability to track login frequency, navigation, and student progress through any given module. The major systems are adept at amassing a plethora of data in the background as it is used. Using this tracking ability, the researchers were able to demonstrate a predictive relationship between frequent usage of the LMS and success in the course.

The relationship between LMS usage and success makes research into design principles especially critical. The need for proper design is partially responsible for the drive to adopt “Web 2.0” technologies for learning management (Conde et al., 2014). Following the belief that individuals are more likely to utilize a more efficiently designed interface, a research team measured responses to a more “flexible, user-centered, and seamless” learning environment interface (LEI) (Abdous, 2013). As hypothesized, the students who interacted with the system reported a higher level of satisfaction with the software. It is important for a later point for one to note that faculty satisfaction was not surveyed.

Much of the research investigating the cutting edge of LMS technology focuses on the student-centric viewpoint, as well. The aforementioned MLearning paradigm focuses on the student’s ease of access to the coursework, and research into the combination of an LMS with social-networking technologies (SNTs) investigated whether collaborative coursework can enable students to band together and accomplish their outcomes as a cohesive unit (Hustad & Arntzen, 2013). Pilot systems were developed and implemented in two separate Norwegian universities to some success.
However, common sense dictates that when looking to determine how to increase the extent to which an LMS is embraced in an institution, the impetus for change rests with the faculty, not the students. Students do not choose whether a traditional, live course uses an LMS to create a “blended” classroom: the instructor does. A student has to follow the direction of the instructor, and often cannot use an LMS for any useful features if the latter neglects to use it. For example, if an instructor decides to keep an analog pen-and-paper gradebook and assign all quizzes in class using Scantron forms, then the gradebook and assessment modules of an LMS would be worthless to the student and unable to be used. This thinking extends to all elements of an LMS; it all falls apart if the instructor doesn’t participate. And if an instructor does end up using it, the mandate for adoption is levied on the student, or they risk failure. Therefore, when looking to investigate campus-wide resistance to an LMS solution, the avenue for the most possible positive change lies in increasing faculty engagement.

Faculty LMS Engagement

Faculty members do not often carry a range of options when it comes to using an LMS. As practical experience shows, an LMS adoption is often institution-wide, and faculty are expected to conform to the institution’s offering. Even though tools have been developed to automate the evaluation process of LMSs for the benefit of faculty (Cavus, 2013), they are not much use in these situations. Instructors can create a website or blog to suit their purposes, but they do not benefit from the frequent access that an institutional LMS offers students who log in on a regular basis. An instructor can also set up a personal server to power an open source LMS instance (like Moodle), but, on top of the aforementioned problem, such a solution is technically complicated and lacks institutional technical support.

Usefulness and Ableness

Of course, before making any judgments on faculty adoption of an LMS, it is vital to grasp an understanding of the technical capabilities of the target audience. If one particular study is to be taken as a representation, evidence shows that, at least in some environments, faculty members generally possess (and are aware they possess) the technical skills necessary to facilitate learning through online solutions. The study in question surveyed faculty members at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Russia, eventually finding that only 13% of the faculty had no experience with the available LMS (Emelyanova & Voronina, 2014). This means that, of the variety of possible factors at play in faculty LMS resistance, the best avenues to investigate would lie outside of the realm of technical capability.

One study in particular sought to analyze faculty opinions on the efficacy of various features of an LMS, specifically Blackboard (Little-Wiles & Naimi, 2011). Little-Wiles’ work surveyed faculty in the College of Technology at Purdue University, gaining information about how Blackboard was utilized, and how the faculty felt about its usefulness. For example, the study produced the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Most Useful for Students</th>
<th>Least Useful for Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syllabus</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources/Web Links</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messages</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Grades</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assignments  44  2
Assessments  19  19
Chat  1  42
Discussions  17  23
Announcements  30  17

Such a tool provides useful, actionable data that characterize the overall faculty perception of an LMS, leading developers to be able to insightfully plan versions of the software’s roadmap. The table shows that faculty members have an exceptionally low opinion of the value of an LMS chat feature (possibly because chat requires synchronous interaction), so more effort can be made to develop other features instead. Furthermore, the faculty members perceive access to the syllabus and the gradebook as vital, which can inform decisions regarding how to make access to these functions as simple as possible.

Even though that research surveyed faculty members, the questions still had a student-centric perspective, and the users used only one LMS: Blackboard. A relatively small amount of research has been conducted to evaluate LMS usability from a purely faculty-centric perspective. One study that falls under that category investigated the faculty perceptions of the “reconfigurability” of an LMS (Wang, Doll, Deng, Park, & Yang, 2013). This metric essentially revolved around how easily an instructor could alter and rearrange both the design/layout and the content of an LMS. The study found that faculty respondents indicated a high level of reconfigurability enabled them to more effectively teach the courses. At this point, it’s useful to reconsider the Abdous (2013) study with the LEI, and its potential to increase ease-of-use. Why were faculty not considered a potential beneficiary with this program? Certainly it would stand to reason that if the faculty end of an LMS followed proper design principles and displayed cohesiveness, it would be possible (and easier) for instructors to continue to develop newer and more exciting ways to present the material in the online modules.

Such a study demonstrates why it is vital to consider faculty the primary “user” in user-centered design of LMSs. However, while design plays a vital role, consideration must be given to how institutional environment affects an instructor’s ability (as well as willingness) to properly utilize an available system. Al-Busaidi attempted to investigate this effect when he surveyed faculty members about various impacting factors (Al-Busaidi & Al-Shihie, 2012). These factors included computer anxiety, technology experience, system quality, management support, and incentives policies. The research showed that the satisfaction of faculty members with an LMS was “a significant determinant of their continuous intention to use LMS in blended learning and their intention to purely use LMS for distance education.” Such a conclusion supports the notion that focusing on faculty engagement with an LMS, especially in a blended learning environment, is vital for the platform to continue to increase in usage.

A low faculty adoption rate has effects that fall outside the classroom, too. A faculty survey focusing solely on the library-specific tools of their LMS found that instructors exhibited low awareness of said tools and “little understanding of their use” (Leeder & Lonn, 2014). This brings one to realize that low faculty adoption rate can impact all of an institution’s student-centered outcomes, not just the ones focusing on the classroom. For example, for faculty who serve as mentors to students, a low awareness of LMS features related to campus activities or groups (and therefore a low level of promotion of said LMS features) can result in a decrease in student extracurricular participation.

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to document faculty LMS adoption came from an extensive survey of faculty at Middle East Technical University (METU) in Turkey. The survey adopted a model using five dimensions (Belief, Application Characteristics, Individual, Social, and Technological) to gauge how well
faculty interacted with the LMS (Findik Coskuncay & Ozkan, 2013). However, even this survey neglected to conduct a wide sample of faculty from various institutions utilizing a variety of LMSs (the faculty were using a proprietary LMS created by METU).

**Motivation**

If studies show that faculty are able to use LMSs, and that they are aware of their potential usefulness, then research is necessary to investigate the motivations (or lack thereof) of faculty members who eschew their use. Some efforts have been made in this area. For example, Gautreau’s (2011) study examined the reasons why faculty did or did not adopt an available LMS. The survey, which featured the responses of 42 communication faculty at a public university in Southern California, focused primarily on extrinsic motivators, such as salary, advancement, and recognition. From a traditional “management” perspective, these are the motivators that administrators are most likely to fall back on, categorizing the adoption of the systems as “faculty development” and searching for traditional methods with which to incentivize the process.

The motivation for adoption of any technology cannot be strictly found in extrinsic sources. Many parallels to LMS faculty adoption can be found in the theory of diffusion of innovations, which holds that, among other things, technology adopters fall into five groups: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 2003). While the LMS is a recent invention as far as pedagogy theory is concerned, its 20-plus year existence means that it is a paradigm open to more than the early adopters. Diffusion of innovation theory also holds that there are two phases through which individuals adopt a technology: the adoption phase, in which a user consciously decides to use it, and the confirmation phase, in which usage becomes continuous with no need to consciously remind oneself to use it. Extrinsic motivators, such as the ones investigated in Gautreau’s research, would likely only work to spur faculty to the adoption phase. The elements most likely to inspire faculty to integrate LMS usage into their teaching methodology would be found in intrinsic motivation, aided by continuing ease of use.

**Methodology**

To assess motivations behind and general opinions of LMS usage among communication faculty, a survey was created using Google forms and distributed to faculty through several avenues. Primarily, contacts representing various state and regional communication associations were provided with information about the project as well as a link that could take faculty to the survey. Distributing surveys this way allowed for a semblance of access control: that is, the researcher could be confident that few, if any, individuals who were not communication faculty would receive the link.

Outside of Georgia, where the researcher was able to observe the link be distributed via listserv, no confirmation was provided from the contacts of the state and regional associations. However, many responses were received across the country, so it’s safe to assume that the link was distributed. Respondents were advised that they could decline to answer any question, and that they could supply a contact email address to be entered into a drawing for a $50 Visa gift card. Respondents were also advised that there was no minimum number of questions to be eligible, and that they could decline any questions without fear of being excluded from the drawing.
The survey asked basic questions about respondents’ institution, type of class taught, and communication sub-discipline. Also asked was the name of the LMS in use at the institution. Two multiple-response questions asked respondents about what LMS features they were aware of as well as what features they regularly used. Respondents then were given open-response questions where they could detail thoughts and opinions about the benefits and drawbacks of the LMS made available to them. The questions were designed to complement a grounded theory method of gathering information about the attitudes and beliefs of communication faculty in the United States. Conducting the survey in this way allows for one to inductively determine the elements that are most important to faculty, rather than attempting to categorize reasons before any reasons are collected. The valid responses (n=218) were then analyzed and coded. The answers to open-response questions were assigned categories, with some responses appearing in two or more codes.

Results

Of the respondents who reported their gender, 43% (n=78) were male. 56% (n=118) of respondents taught at the undergraduate level while 33% (n=69) taught both undergraduate and graduate courses. 95% (n=195) of respondents reported that they primarily teach in the traditional classroom, while the remaining 5% reported teaching online. 7% (n=15) of respondents were adjunct or part-time faculty, and 14% (n=31) of respondents identified as administrators with a faculty load. The remaining responses were from full-time faculty, split between non-tenure track, tenure track, and tenured.

One question asked respondents what available features of their LMS they regularly used. Of the options, four were selected in over 85% of responses: email (from within the LMS), gradebook, online assignment submission, and online assignment and feedback. Three options were selected in over 50% of responses: online discussion/forums, online quizzes, and resource sharing (syllabus, handouts, etc.). 27% of respondents reported using media resource sharing (videos, websites, etc.), and only 4% of respondents reported using an online chat feature. One interesting observation to note: while a variety of LMS platforms are used by the respondents (with no single platform representing more than 35% of the response pool), no statistically significant correlations are found between platform and feature usage.

The survey asked faculty members to share what they believed were the benefits and drawbacks of using an LMS; these questions had their responses coded. A few key elements emerged: first, over 80% of faculty indicated that they considered the ability for students to access key resources at any time a benefit. The next-closest benefit listed was the ability to keep student submissions organized, which was indicated by 35% of responses. While a variety of other benefits were mentioned (e.g. environmental friendliness, plagiarism checking), none were reported by at least 10% of respondents.

No single coded drawback was reported by at least 75% of respondents. The largest drawback listed was “ease of use,” which was represented by individuals who stated that simple tasks were too cumbersome, took too long, or required too many clicks or selections to execute. The “ease of use” response was reported by 58% of faculty. Also of note was the concern for what has been coded as “student disengagement,” where students may stop being in touch with their grades, lose a sense of accountability for the course, or not bother with going online to read the syllabus. Student disengagement was listed as a drawback among 34% of faculty. A particularly interesting response was that a drawback is found in the confusing nature of emailing classes. While only 15% of responses listed this as a drawback, 86% of those came from respondents who employed D2L/Brightspace. A deeper analysis of those comments
revealed that respondents were frustrated with the inability to use “regular email” to continue threads that originated from within the LMS.

Finally, respondents were asked to list potential features and changes to their LMS that would make the platform more useful to them. Only 54% (n=118) of respondents chose to answer the question. Of the responses, 84% (n=99) issued responses that could be coded as “usability improvements.” These responses included answers that indicated a desire for visual redumps, flattening of menus, inclusion of more features in the mobile app, and ability to quickly repeat actions across multiple sections of a course.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the responses support the possibility that faculty are concerned primarily with the ability to utilize their LMS as an efficient and timesaving tool. Furthermore, faculty members are not showing signs of being concerned with the student-centric elements of the LMS. The questions concerning benefits and drawbacks were open to interpretation, leaving an avenue for a response to focus on student outcomes. Faculty responses indicate a desire to enhance student communication and resource management while decreasing the time and effort required to prepare a course or conduct regular updates. Very few requests were made for outright new features. The few that did request features did so because they were aware that other LMS platforms included the feature.

Essentially, it is vital that research into the adoption and usage of LMSs continues to grow and organize. While a lot of effective research has been conducted that focuses on the student-LMS interaction, this research should not overshadow the examination of the faculty relationship with the platform. This is especially true because the instructor of a given class usually sets the standard for how deeply an LMS will be integrated into the course.

Most of the research on LMS integration, particularly from the perspective of faculty adoption, remains scattered. Both surveys and pilot studies are too narrowly focused, preventing both a broad understanding of faculty LMS perceptions (even within the context of a singular discipline) and the emergence of a prevailing theoretical framework regarding faculty LMS adoption. It is apparent that broad, wide-ranging studies must be conducted to establish faculty opinions of LMSs, free from the constraints of accepting answers limited to one institution, one region, or even one particular LMS. Only then can a unified theory begin to materialize, allowing software developers to retune their products, creating a domino effect that culminates with unprecedented faculty LMS adoption and the hopeful accomplishment of many more student learning outcomes than believed possible.

References


**Adaptation and Persuasion Across Cultures: Examining Social Influence Utilized By Chinese Students in American Classrooms**  
*Sarah Jia Min, Dalton State College*

**Introduction**

According to one count, there were 886,053 international students studying in the United States in 2013-14 (Open Doors, 2014). A great many came from Asian countries, making this one of the largest ethnic groups of students represented in the United States; about one third of these are from China (Education USA, 2008). According to Cushner and Brislin (1996), most American college students will be in frequent contact with people who are different from them. Awareness of such intercultural communication implications is crucial, especially for Chinese students, whose communication and influence styles differ significantly in many cases compared with those deemed culturally appropriate in the United States. Consequently, an American may take offense at a communication behavior of a Chinese student if it breaks the social norms in the United States. Similarly, Chinese students may find that an American student’s behavior in a particular situation is rude and unacceptable because it is not fitting or appropriate to the Chinese way of life. These communication differences can affect the communication in students' academic and social lives, both. Therefore, it is important to determine effective ways for Chinese students to adapt to a new culture and become successfully involved in the new environment.

This paper focuses on two components critical to improving Chinese students' lives while they study in the United States. The first component is cultural. Brett and Okumura (2008) concluded, “Culture provides scripts and schemas for negotiation” (p. 495). The second component that I examine in this article is social influence. For example, it is important to explore the persuasive strategies that Asian students use in specific academic and social situations. Ultimately, research in this area highlights the important role that culture plays in persuasive communication transactions. The purpose of this paper is to determine how a better understanding of persuasive and cross-cultural communication can help Asian students”—specifically Chinese students”—academic and social lives. This paper will examine the relevant and extant literature and the isolated gaps that may form the basis for future study.

**Review of Literature**

This review of literature will first cover cross-cultural communication through Adaptation Theory. The second part will cover persuasive aspects through compliance-gaining (e.g., liking and fear). The third section will discuss differences between Asian and American culture in compliance-gaining, looking specifically at face work.

**Adaptation Theory**

Adaptation is used to describe the need to make long-term value, behavior, and identity changes; people use adaptation to describe the changes brought by the new environment and try to “fit” in (Anderson, 1994, p. 300). As strangers experience a progression of internal change, they are likely to undergo a set of identifiable transformations in their habitual patterns of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses.
(Kim, 2001, p. 238). Through the processes of deculturation and acculturation, some of the “old” cultural habits are replaced by new cultural habits. Individuals gradually acquire increasing proficiency in self-expression and in fulfilling their various social needs.

To examine how this process of adaptation influences Chinese students, it is important to understand how closely culture, communication, and identity are intertwined. To do this, we first need to view the three as interdependent parts of a system. A system is generally defined as “any person or whole that consists of interdependent parts” whose function assumes “dynamic interactions among its parts and with its environment” (Kim & Ruben, 1988, p. 307). For instance, in this system, for American students, the ideas of individual freedom, independence, and personal choice are cultural values taught to them and reinforced by their families, friends, and educational systems. Their parents expect them to make their own decisions about their friends, romantic partners, careers, and lifestyles based on the values they have been taught. Their peers encourage them to experiment and find their own ways of expressing themselves. A “good” student is one who is able to express her or his opinions, ideas, and uncertainties. Small class sizes are valued because they allow teachers to give each student more individual attention based on the student's unique needs.

Students from Asian countries, on the other hand, are more likely to have learned to seek support from and feel obligated to family, friends, and the institutions to which they belong (Kim, 2001). They are taught to respect hierarchy and those who are older or in positions of higher status. Asian students are expected to obey parents and teachers. Good students listen and remember what they are told; they seldom speak out in class or question their teachers. They prefer larger classrooms because students must depend on one another rather than on the teacher for support (Kim & Ruben, 1998, p. 309). According to Kim (2001), the preference for large classrooms is critically different between Asian student and American students.

Most Chinese students know that cultures are constantly changing and that students must adapt to new information, ideas, environments, and people. However, it is harder for Chinese students to understand those cultural differences and adapt to the new culture effectively (Kim, 2001). When they see some American behaviors, they cannot help but be surprised or even uncomfortable. They might be willing to acknowledge the differences, but many are not ready to change yet. Most Chinese students respect these cultural differences and still want to maintain their own opinions and conflict resolution styles (Kim, 1998, p. 133). That is how miscommunication and conflict start. Therefore, adapting to a new culture is the preparation for doing anything else.

Communication is the process by which all culture is learned and through which all cultural interactions take place. Through communication, people learn to relate to their environments and how to navigate their cultures as well as who they are; communication is also how identity is defined (Kim, 1988). Living in the United States requires Chinese students to learn their own culture and to adapt to the new culture. So, it requires them to interact in meaningful ways with Americans, whose cultural experience and beliefs are different from their own. To be successful, individuals need to make adjustments in their behaviors and assumptions about people and relationships (p. 50). Communication, therefore, is at the core of culture learning. Better communication skills would lead to better adaptation, better adaptation to more frequent and satisfying interaction, which in turn leads to greater adaptation (Kealey, 1989). The greater the difference between the cultures, the greater the potential disruption in the cultural identity system. The host or dominant culture has a powerful influence on what is viewed as “normal” behavior in any given situation, and it is the sojourner who must do the adjusting (Martin, Nakayama & Flores, 2002).
This is where the pressures come from for Asian students. Those pressures will force students to seek change and adapt to the new culture.

**Persuasion and Compliance-Gaining**

To many people, persuasion brings to mind terms such as attitude formation, attitude change, and argument. According to Roloff and Miller (1980), attitude formation is also known as response shaping. There are many influences that help shape a person’s response, including society, peers, parents, ministers, and schools. An attitude change occurs when one set of established behaviors is replaced by another. Much research has investigated the different approaches one can use in an attempt to change either a person’s response or attitude. To help Chinese students lead an effective and satisfying academic and social life in the United States, it is important to understand the differences and connections between persuasion, coercion, and compliance-gaining strategies.

In most Asian countries, including China, individuals tend to use coercion instead of persuasion in school, and this practice may leave some Asian students with the impression that coercion is persuasion (Kim, 1995, p. 160). As a result it is important to know the distinction between persuasion and coercion. According to Perloff (1993), persuasion occurs when the receiver of the message feels he or she has a choice and makes an internal decision to agree with the message. Coercion occurs when the person feels that he or she has “no choice” in the matter and outwardly accepts the message, but internally disagrees with it. This distinction between persuasion and coercion suggests that a target of the behavior has free will in persuasion and does not have free will in coercion. Many scholars define compliance-gaining more narrowly than persuasion by saying it is an effort of one person to effect the receiver’s response. Therefore, compliance-gaining can be viewed as a persuasive communication that a speaker uses to elicit a response or behavior from the receiver, rather than simply changing a belief or attitude.

Ewoldsen (1997) contended that “compliance involves a change resulting from a powerful source motivating people to alter their behaviors” (p. 200). One of the areas of compliance-gaining research that has received much attention is the choice of compliance-gaining strategies. Argyle (1972) first defined compliance-gaining strategies as social techniques that people use in certain situations. He said that a person does not use the same techniques all the time. For instance if the technique does not work the first time, the person will choose a different strategy. Ewoldsen (1997) also indicated that different types of arguments, strategies, and tactics are used to persuade other people to change their opinion.

Wiseman and Schenck-Hamlin (1981) outlined two approaches of compliance-gaining strategies that have been developed: deductive and inductive approaches. The most frequently used compilation of deductive compliance-gaining techniques is Marwell and Schmitt’s (1967) sixteen strategies (See Table 1 for an example).

Compliance-gaining strategies depend on the situation: interpersonal, non-interpersonal, long-term, or short-term. Different situations may affect the way people chose and interpret compliance-gaining strategies. Also, those strategies may be interpreted in different ways and cause different results based on the receiver’s cultural background. For example, Chinese students may use fewer oriented strategies than American students because they may perceive that it is more productive to simply follow the instructor’s advice. In contrast, American students may be more willing to do the work if they can gain something from it (e.g., extra credit).
Table 1

Marwell and Schmitt’s Sixteen Compliance-Gaining Techniques

1. Promise
   (If you comply, I will reward you)
   “You offer to increase Dick’s allowance if he increases his studying.”

2. Threat
   (If you do not comply I will punish you)
   “You threaten to forbid Dick the use of the car if he does not increase his studying.”

3. Expertise
   (If you comply you will be rewarded because of “the nature of things”)
   (Positive) “You point out to Dick that if he gets good grades he will be able to get into a good college and get a good job.”

4. Expertise
   (If you do not comply you will be punished because of “the nature of things”)
   “You point out to Dick that if he does not get good grades he will not be able to get into a good college or get a good job.”

5. Liking
   (Actor is friendly and helpful to get target in “good frame of mind” so that He will comply with request)
   “You try to be as friendly and pleasant as possible to get Dick in the ‘right frame of mind’ before asking him to study.”

6. Pre-Giving
   (Actor rewards target before requesting compliance)
   “You raise Dick’s allowance and tell him you now expect him to study.”

7. Aversive
   Stimulation
   (Actor continuously punished target making cessation contingent on compliance)
   “You forbid Dick the use of the car and tell him he will not be allowed to drive until he studies more.”

8. Debt
   (You owe me compliance because of past favors)
   “You point out that you have sacrificed and saved to pay for Dick’s education and he owes it to you to get good enough grades to get into a good college.”

9. Moral Appeal
   (You are immoral if you do not comply)
   “You tell Dick that it is morally wrong for anyone not to get as good grades as he can and that he should study more.”

10. Self-Feeling
    (Positive)
    “You tell Dick he will feel proud if he gets himself to study more.”

11. Self-Feeling
    (Negative)
    “You tell Dick he will feel ashamed of himself if he gets bad grades.”

12. Altercasting
    (Positive)
    (A person with “good qualities would comply)
    “You tell Dick that since he is a mature and intelligent boy he naturally will want to study more and get good grades.”

13. Altercasting
    (Negative)
    (Only a person with “bad” qualities would not comply)
    “You tell Dick that only someone very childish does not study as he should.”

14. Altruism
    (I need your compliance very badly, so do it for me)
    “You tell Dick that you really want very badly for him to get into a good college and that you wish he would study more as a personal favor for you.”

15. Esteem
    (People you value will think better of you if you comply)
    (Positive) “You tell Dick that the whole family will be very proud of him if he gets good grades.”

16. Esteem
    (People you value will think worse of you if you do not comply)
    (Negative) “You tell Dick that the whole family will be very disappointed (in him) if he gets poor grades.”
Cultural Differences in Compliance-Gaining

As noted at the beginning of this article, cultural differences cause differences in persuasion as well—a particularly salient issue for Chinese students. Cross-cultural research suggests that it is unlikely that people from different cultures will expect the same behaviors or anticipate the same responses. However, most likely, neither Chinese students nor American students are aware of all of the differences between their cultures. Chinese students tend to resort to the same types of persuasive strategies that they used in their home country because that is what they learned there (Kim, 1995). Many American students reason that since other students come to study in the United States, they should play American "rules" and follow the directions here. Neulip and Hazleton (1985) proposed:

To the extent that persuasion is a basic function of communication, it must be considered a cross-cultural phenomenon. It may not be reasonable, however, to assume that the same strategies and tactics are used across cultures or that they have the same effects in different cultures. (p. 389)

Burgoon et al. (1982) used Marwell and Schmitt’s (1967) strategies and found differences between Asians’ and Americans’ use of compliance-gaining strategies. Specifically, they concluded that “Asians had a tendency to have a higher likelihood of using virtually all of the persuasive strategies, but particularly the positively oriented ones” (p. 85). For example, for Asians, a positive strategy is giving a hint to someone in an attempt to gain compliance; in contrast, directly telling a person to do something to gain compliance is a negative strategy.

Increasingly, researchers are not satisfied to look only at certain Western countries in a particular communication phenomenon like compliance-gaining. Rather, scholars seem interested also in examining connections between culture and persuasion and in how communication and compliance-gaining work together through different countries. Scholars in cross-cultural communication have isolated a host of variables that might influence the communication process between cultural “strangers” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992).

The first concept that helps to build a bridge between cross-cultural communication and persuasion is individualism. According to Hofstede (1997), individualism is characteristic of “societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family” (p. 51). Most Asian countries have a collectivist culture, and the United States is mainly an individualistic culture. This may explain why Chinese students have a hard time adapting to American culture and using persuasion strategies different from those of American students. For example, in the United States, students are invited to question anything they do not understand or to feel free to speak out their opinions; but Asian students tend to seek to avoid conflict and to not say anything unless they are certain their answer is correct (Kim, 1995).

The second concept is facework, which has also has been referred to as face management. Face-management theory revolves around the notion that communicators in an interaction try to preserve their own face and the other person’s face. Goffman (1967) explains that face is “an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself” (p.5). For both Chinese and American students, facework plays a role in persuasion and communication.
Face is a “claimed sense of favorable social self-worth that a person wants to have for her or him” (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 187). Goffman (1967) emphasized that people seek to claim a positive self-image and to display the appropriate social actions that are consistent with face. When the image that one wants to portray for oneself is challenged, either by that person or by another speaker, the communicators will often engage in “facework.” This explains why, when conflict and persuasion occur, facework plays an important role. In terms of cross-cultural communication, Ting-Toomey (1999) developed a theory designed to interpret how people in individualistic and collectivist cultures negotiate face in conflict situations. She suggested that people have two types of face concerns: positive and negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987) asserted that positive face is “the positive consistent self-image or personality claimed by interactants” (p. 61). Negative face was defined as “the desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition by others” (Ting-Toomey, 1994, p. 16).

Ting-Toomey (1994) assumed that people in all cultures attempt to keep and negotiate face in all communication situations. She discussed three main aspects of facework, all of which seem to be based strongly on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory. She argued that people in all cultures balance both negative and positive face needs. In most interactions, people from individualist cultures (e.g., the United States) will be more concerned with preserving others’ negative face rather than their positive face. People from collectivist cultures (e.g., China), on the other hand, will more likely be interested in maintaining others’ positive face than preserving their negative face. For example, an American will likely be more concerned with obtaining clarity, where a Chinese person might be more concerned with preserving the relationship. When it comes to persuasion, a Chinese person will use very different approaches. Overall, people from collectivist cultures will use more face-support than will people from individualistic cultures.

Another aspect of face management is face concerns, which refers to whether one will respect one’s own face needs or the needs of the other person in an interaction (Ting-Toomey, 1994). It is important for people of all cultures in most social interactions to balance a concern for self and other. An example of self-concern is a person focusing on her or his own need to spend time alone or to be liked, as opposed to the needs of other interactants. This would influence which compliance-gaining strategies are chosen. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested that compliance-gaining is inherently threatening to the other person’s negative face; one would likely prefer indirect strategies (e.g., hint) to allow the other as much autonomy as possible.

Practical Implications

This study informs us that it is important to understand the cultural communication differences between Chinese students and American students. This is especially important when persuasion occurs between diverse cultures. The focus on compliance-gaining and facework can also be essential for students who study in environments where persuasion, negotiations, and arguments take place.

For example, based on scholars’ findings, if an American student went to study at a school in China, he or she would openly use persuasion because it is a cultural norm for Americans to be direct. On the other hand, Chinese students may have a hard time accepting the openness and directness of the American students.

Here are three suggestions to make it easier and quicker for international students to adapt to U. S. culture.
First, universities/colleges should have orientation program for new, in-coming international students. This program needs to go through the whole semester. During the program, American instructors can inform students of “do’s” and “don’ts,” including for both academic and social life. For example, school can teach students proper behaviors from how to choose an adviser to what to do when attending a family party, etc.

Second, schools can seek volunteers on campus who would like to meet occasionally with those international students one-on-one, to help them improve their English skills, get groceries, and learn about culture. This would prove an opportunity for Chinese students to interact more with American students and American culture.

Third, not only for students, but also for instructors: It may be helpful if all instructors receive a summary of each of the international students they have in their class: culture, background, and how to pronounce their names.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers should focus more on how persuasion and intercultural communication work together. This would help students have a better idea about how persuasion changes among different cultures. Previous studies have established that there are cultural differences that can lead to misunderstanding of each culture’s use of communication. However, little research has been done on compliance-gaining strategies used in different cultures. Most compliance-gaining is limited and not generalizable to other cultures because a majority of these studies have been done in the United States.

As a direction for future research, investigators perhaps could measure if there would be an interaction between status and culture and how persuasion works different among them. Future researchers might also focus more on Asian countries, rather than Asia as a whole. Not all Asian countries are the same culturally. So, it is important to distinguish them. Much research has been done on Japan and India, but not as much on China. This could be an area for future research.

Other factors besides culture and compliance-gaining use should be studied. For example, researchers may want to expand their studies to learn whether there are major differences in the way each culture views power versus status. This could allow scholars to determine how the role of power of the receiver of a message may influence a persuader.

Conclusion

This article examined definition of adaptation theory, cultural, compliance-gaining, and facework. It also explored differences between Chinese and American culture in compliance-gaining and how individualism/collectivism and facework work through those cultures. At the same time, this article focused on the compliance-gaining strategies of Chinese and American students. Finally, concepts of adaptation theory and facework were employed as a mechanism to better understand cultural difference in persuasive strategy selection.
References


Music in the Communication Classroom:
Using Music to Teach about Stereotypes and Expectations

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**Goals**

The goals of this activity are:
1. To help students experience, in a very practical way, the ideology surrounding stereotyping.
2. To help students understand how they ascribe characteristics to people and how they use stereotypes in everyday circumstances.
3. To increase student understanding about expectations they place on other people.

**Rationale**

Students often believe that other individuals use stereotyping and are prejudiced, but students also often believe that they are immune to such practices because they are so open-minded. This activity teaches students that they do indeed likely engage in stereotyping even in small, everyday life practices. As the students experience this issue first-hand, they realize that they judge, critique, and have expectations of the people around them. Through the activity, they begin to understand the importance of stereotyping in their own communication practices.

**Directions**

1. Give each student a handout that has five separate categories. The categories can be labeled “Clip 1,” “Clip 2,” “Clip 3,” “Clip 4,” and “Clip 5.” Or you can simply ask the student to get their own paper and divide it into five categories.
2. Explain to the students that you will be playing five different types of music, and that when they hear the music clip, they need to describe the person who would listen to that particular style of music.
3. Next, you should play one style of music. I usually like to start with classical music. After having students listen to the music, tell them to write down, in the first category, a description of the person who listens to that style of music. Tell them to be sure to include as much detail as possible. Then move onto the next style of music, repeating the process until the students have heard five distinct music genres and have described five different groups of people. You can access music on the Internet (through you-tube or by searching music genres or specific musical artists), and you can easily play the clips in a “smart” classroom. I usually play music clips from the following genres: classical, hip-hop, jazz, country, and pop. However, you can choose music from any genre and even music from various cultures.
4. The activity should conclude with a thorough debriefing. Ask the students to describe the individuals who listen to classical music and work through listener descriptions of each style of music. Ask the following questions as part of the debriefing session. Why did you describe classical/hip-hop/country/etc. music listeners in the manner you did? What led you to the various descriptions? Are all classical/hip-hop/country music listeners like you describe them? Is it stereotyping to ascribe characteristics to a specific group of music listeners? How would stereotyping various music listeners into categories change your communication with that individual?
Explanation

This exercise is a great way to teach three concepts to students. (1) Students learn about ascribed characteristics. (2) Students learn how easy it is to stereotype. (3) Students learn how their communication with specific groups of people is influenced by their expectations and stereotyping. Instructors can easily use the activity any time during the semester without a great deal of organizing and preparing prior to class. Because students enjoy music and sharing their ideas, they find this activity very enjoyable. Admittedly, this activity is about having fun and enjoying class, but it also helps students to understand concepts that are so important to human communication.

Typical Results

Students tend to enjoy this activity because they love to listen to audio clips and love to watch video clips. I have had great success with this activity. Many students do not believe that they stereotype. They tend to see it as a flaw that other people have. By the end of the activity, they realize that they, too, stereotype. Students also learn how stereotyping and ascribing characteristics can influence how they communicate with others. The activity requires about 15-20 minutes (depending on the length of your debriefing session). So, it is a relatively quick exercise, it is very portable, and it is easy to use. I find that this is the type of activity that really makes students involved in class discussion, and it helps them to apply the class material to real life. This activity is well worth the class time.

Bibliography


How do students assess website credibility?
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Abstract

After listening while her instructor explains that her informative speech will require citing multiple sources, a student asks: “Can we cite Wikipedia?” What is an instructor to do? This study tries to give instructors some insight into how students assess website credibility and the effectiveness of some of the techniques used to assess website credibility. It finds that although instruction may prove minimally helpful to change students’ ideas about website credibility, much more instruction and practice is necessary if students are truly going to change habits that have likely been ingrained for years.

What makes online information credible?

Metzger (2007) refers to the ability to assess website credibility as digital literacy. She identifies, based on previous research, five criteria “that users should employ in their assessments of the credibility of Internet-based information” (p. 2079). She defines them as follows:

- **Accuracy** – refers to the degree to which a website is free from errors, whether the information can be verified offline, and the reliability of the information on the site.
- **Authority** – may be assessed by noting who authored the site and whether contact information is provided for that person or organization, what the author’s credentials, qualifications, and affiliations are and whether the website is recommended by a trusted source.
- **Objectivity** – involves identifying the purpose of the site and whether the information provided is fact or opinion, which also includes understanding whether there might be commercial intent or a conflict of interest on the part of source, as well as the nature of the relationship between linked information sources.
- **Currency** – refers to whether the information is up to date.
- **Coverage** – refers to the comprehensiveness or depth of the information provided on the site.

Metzger suggests that assessing these criteria “requires a range of activities on the part of users, from simple visual inspection of a website to more laborious information verification and triangulation efforts. She goes on to outline several methods for doing this work.

Recommended techniques for assessing website credibility

According to Metzger (2007),

The Internet has made the need to critically evaluate information more important than ever before while also shifting the burden of credibility assessment and quality control from professional gatekeepers onto individual information seekers. Developing the skills to evaluate web-based information, then, is crucial for Internet users; however, there is evidence that many people are unprepared for this responsibility and may have trouble determining how to assess the credibility of online information. (p. 2079)

To help educate people about assessing website credibility, researchers and trainers have developed several methods to help people evaluate online information. Metzger outlined several of these methods.
The Checklist Approach

Metzger (2007) described checklist approaches to website credibility as methods “that guide users through a process” in which “users are taught to ask and answer a list of questions designed to cover each criterion” (p. 2079). Metzger cited studies that, in essence, showed that many people do not take the time to address all the criteria on the checklist. Meola (2004) also criticized the checklist approach. He suggested that the checklist approach is based on several flawed assumptions: 1) that there are no standards to what information can be posted online, 2) that students are hyper-gullible, and 3) that librarians are the ultimate judges of source credibility. Meola argued that “to slip from the notion that because there is no central authority that vets content to the conclusion that, therefore, nothing on the web has been vetted is a mistake” (p. 331). He points to the increase in peer-reviewed information and the accessibility through database subscriptions to full-text equivalents of journal, magazine, and newspaper articles. He also argued that college students do understand the pitfalls of online information. He cited a study that suggested that college students see “accuracy is the most important attribute of information” and that they are aware that the Internet “falls considerably short in meeting this criterion” (p. 332). He also asserted that librarians are not necessarily the most “suited” to teach others how to evaluate websites because selecting items for a library collection “is different from evaluating the accuracy of information for a research paper” (p. 332). He contended that when librarians do not have to worry about the cost of an item, they “tend to be less evaluative” and, moreover, that simply transferring the traditional checklist is not always effective in the most difficult on-line cases. So, by debunking some of the assumptions of the checklist approach, he began to move toward developing his own method of evaluating websites: the contextual method.

The Contextual Approach

According to Meola (2004), a new way to assess website credibility is needed that does not make the assumptions of the checklist approach. He cited findings of a 2001-02 survey of the library cooperative OCLC and argued:

According to the survey, students already value three of the five criteria librarians use for evaluating information: accuracy, currency, and authority. An alternative explanation of why students use information from the free web in their papers is not that they are so easily deceived but that they do not want to do any more work than necessary, and their professors allow them to get away with using dubious websites in their bibliographies. (p. 334)

So, for Meola, the way to address the credibility of online information was not to create a long checklist that requires extra work to verify. He proposed a different approach.

Meola (2004) outlined his contextual approach to website evaluation. Rather than focusing on what he described as “internal characteristics” of a source, the contextual approach focuses on “information external to the website in order to evaluate it” (p. 336). “In using external information to evaluate websites, information is located within its wider social context, facilitating reading judgments of information quality” (p. 336). Meola seemed to figure that eventually the public that is using the source will make a reasoned judgment about its credibility.

Meola (2004) outlined three parts of his contextual approach:

- Promoting and explaining reviewed sources. This sidesteps “the whole problem of teaching website evaluation. Instead of assuming that students will only use the free Web and are ignorant of
the evils that lurk there, this method assumes that students do value accurate sources but are not informed enough about the high quality, Web-accessible, vetted resources that college and university libraries access through the Web” (p. 337).
- Comparison. “When applied to the evaluation of websites, comparing means analyzing the similarities and differences in the content of two or more free websites to each other or comparing the content from free websites to other information formats such as newspaper or magazine articles, peer-reviewed journal articles, or scholarly books” (p. 338).
- Corroboration. “To corroborate information is to verify it against one or more different sources. . . . A simple rule for students could be: do not use information unless you have corroborated it. Corroboration with varied and reviewed sources increases the probability of accuracy. (p. 339)

Other Approaches

Metzger (2007) also discussed the cognitive approach developed by Fritch and Cromwell (2001, 2002). This interactive model says that the information seeker ascribes cognitive authority to a source at three different levels: the author, the document, and affiliations (Metzger, 2007). Metzger also cited Walthen and Burknell (2002) as developing a similar model which looks at three stages of the evaluation process. The main difference between these models, according to Metzger (2007) and the checklist is a focus on the information receiver rather than source. Finally, Metzger proposed another model of credibility assessment: a dual processing model that focuses on the motivation and cognitive ability of the information seeker. “In brief, these models theorize that people will process and/or scrutinize messages in more or less depth depending upon the receiver’s motivation and ability to do” (p. 2087).

Hypothesis

After considering these different models and studies assessing the credibility of online information, it seems clear that much more research needs to be done. This study aims to see how undergraduate students typically approach assessing website credibility and whether instructing students about these different methods in assessing website credibility can change their perspective on this important skill-set.

RQ1: What do you students see as the most important criterion in assess the credibility of online information?

H1: After receiving instruction, students will demonstrate a change in their perception of how to assess website credibility by assigning rankings to given criteria that more reflect ideal rankings of those criteria after the instruction than they did before the instruction.

Methods

Participants

Sixty-eight participants completed the instrument overall, but only 45 completed it according to instructions that allowed their results to be included for analysis. All participants were undergraduate students in human communication classes at a Southern regional institution. These classes can be taken to fulfill a core curriculum requirement at the university and draw a range of students. Data were gathered over two semesters.


**Instruments**

The instrument used was a checklist, loosely based on the criteria Metzger (2007) outlined, but including items that have nothing to do with the agreed-upon criteria, geared to capture a baseline idea of how students think about and assess website credibility. Students were asked to rank items on a scale of 1-10 according to how important they considered an item when determining website credibility. Participants were told to assign 1 to the most important item and 10 to the least important item. Given that, as Metzger pointed out, academics generally agree that all of the criteria should be considered when assessing website credibility, but no agreed-upon ranking of the items exists, the researcher divided the list into a top half (5 most important items) and bottom half (5 least important items), leaving much room for interpretation while still being able to measure changes in ranking between the pretests and post-tests.

**Procedure**

For each of the two course sections that participated in this (one in Fall 2013 and one in Spring 2015), the checklist was administered twice. The first time it was administered was as a pretest given one class session before instruction about different techniques for assessing website credibility. The second time was after students had completed research for their next assignment, about two weeks after instruction. The goal in administering the pretest was to gain a baseline idea of how students approached assessing website credibility. The goal in the post-test was to have students reflect on how they completed their most recent research after hearing about the different techniques for assessing website credibility presented earlier. The instruction given to the participants in between the pretests and post-tests included a presentation of the different approaches to assessing website credibility, mainly focusing on the difference between the checklist and contextual approach and, to some extent, encouraging students to try the contextual approach for their next assignment.

**Results**

The data gathered were entered into statistical software for processing. In short, the hypothesis was technically supported by the change in student ranking of one item between the pre- and post-test, one can argue that the results were actually very mixed and shed more insight into the eclectic way that students approach website credibility than into how a minimal amount of instruction helped to mitigate that confusion.

**Most Common Ranking v. Percentage of Students in Agreement**

Several points must be made in order to understand and interpret these results. The first is the difference between the most common ranking of an item and the percentage of students who assigned that item to the appropriate half of the list as per the researcher’s ideal. One can see how both could have merit for measuring the change in ranking. Does success mean that more students ranked that item in the top half of the list or that the most common ranking of that item was one that fit in the correct half?

In the pretest, only two items (#2 and #7) were placed in the correct half of the list by more than 50% of participants. Three additional items (#2, #4 and #5) were placed in the correct half by more than 40% of participants. Although this would seem to leave much room for improvement over the course of instruction and post-test, the post-test data show no single item being placed in the correct half of the list by more than 38% of participants. By this measurement, the hypothesis is not supported. In fact, by this
measurement, the instruction had the reverse of the intended effect with participants seemingly more likely to place an item in the wrong half after receiving instruction than in the pre-test. However, looking at the most common ranking for each item, a different pattern emerges. From that perspective, participants placed three items (#3, #2, and #9) in the wrong half of the list during the pretest but did rank one of the those items (#3) in the correct half after the instruction and post-test, thus demonstrating at least a technical support for the hypothesis.

**Discussion**

Why was there such a discrepancy between most common ranking and percentage of students? As one begins to interpret these results, several issues come to mind. One of the most important is the issue of the basic unit of success as discussed earlier and why there is such a discrepancy between the most common ranking student assigned to a criterion and the percentage of students who placed the item in the correct half of the list. One can argue that the discrepancy reflects the eclectic nature of students' previous instruction in how to assess website credibility. If students had more consistent instruction, the results would have been more consistent. To prove this theory, one would have to collect data about how participants had been previously trained to assess website credibility. On the other hand, perhaps the failure, by the measurement of student percentage, for the instruction to make any positive change in how the participants ranked the criteria stems from the instruction itself, or the creation of the instrument, or the way the data was collected and analyzed.

**Limitations and suggestions for future research**

There are several important imitations of this study. The first is the sample size. Clearly more participants are needed to make more substantial claims. Second, because of the issue with how to determine what measurement will be used to determine the success of the instruction, perhaps a different instrument could be used that does not leave as much room for interpretation and confusion. These issues represent some of the main limitations of this study and suggest some future research. In addition to addressing these limitations, further research can also, as suggested, try to assess students previous training in assess the credibility of online information. One can also perhaps look more closely not just at how student report their understanding of how to assess website credibility but also how they actually assess it as they complete an assignment. The original conception of this study included having students describe in a qualitative style how they conducted online research for a particular assignment but that part of the study did not come to fruition for several reasons. Further analysis of how students actually engage with online research and then comparing those findings with which model it best fit could help move scholarship in this area forward.

**References**


Begin a Toastmasters International Club on a College Campus
Penny Waddell, Faculty, Gwinnett Technical College

TOASTMASTERS INTERNATIONAL
For Your College Campus

› Guidelines and Types of Clubs
› Resources Available
› Challenges and Rewards
Guidelines and Types of Clubs

Guidelines to Consider
- College
- Toastmasters International Club

Types of Clubs
- Community
- Corporate

Resources Available

Resources
- College/University
  - Student Services Director
  - Advisors
  - Officers
- Toastmasters
  - Area/District Governors
  - Sponsors
  - Mentors
Challenges and Rewards

Challenges
- Leadership
- Finances
- Membership
- Meeting Schedules

Rewards
- Professional Development
- Communication Skills
- Leadership Skills
- Community Involvement

Links
- Toastmasters International Home Page
  https://www.toastmasters.org/
- GTC Students’ Toastmasters International
  Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pages/GTC-Student-Toastmasters-International/415629084641972
  Website: http://2899293.toastmastersclubs.org/
  School’s Website: http://www.gwinnettech.edu/content.cfm/PageCode=clubs