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## Problematic Student Behaviors in the College Communication Classroom: Reviewing and Re-envisioning Instructional Communication Research

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## **Problematic Student Behaviors in the College Communication Classroom: Reviewing and Re-envisioning Instructional Communication Research**

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*Javette G. Hayes*

Possessing knowledge regarding the content of a course is but one prerequisite to teaching it well; successful teachers must also be concerned with creating a climate conducive to learning (e.g., by engaging in effective classroom management; Plax & Kearney, 1990, 1999). Veenman (1984) discusses the “reality shock” that teachers experience when their ideals clash with the “harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life” (p. 143). In its most severe form, reality shock manifests itself in disillusion so potent that it results in teachers leaving the profession (Müller-Fohrbrodt, Cloetta, & Dann, 1978, as cited in Veenman, 1984). Veenman’s (1984) findings indicate classroom discipline as a serious problem. Whether neophytes or experts, instructors of basic communication courses at the college level may experience mild or severe reality shock from time to time as they encounter the vast array of challenging situations that emerge in the process of teaching.

Simonds (1997) claims “little research has been done that deals directly with inappropriate behavior in the college classroom,” but notes that much work of this kind has been conducted at other levels of education (p. 482). While people most often associate student misbe-

havior with children and adolescents, and while the college classroom may be an environment that requires little management effort in comparison to the elementary or secondary classroom, adult learners are not free of behavioral problems (Burroughs, Kearney, & Plax, 1989). Their typical problems may be of a different sort than those observed among younger classes, but they are nonetheless significant in their consequences for the daily functioning of classrooms and for the accomplishment of academic institutions' ultimate purpose: student learning. Students' behaviors may temporarily distract the teacher or other students from the topic at hand or they may completely ruin the atmosphere for open and productive learning. Therefore, instructors should be informed about and prepared to address these issues. The purpose of this piece is twofold: (1) to provide for new and experienced teachers a detailed review, interpretation, and critique of literature on potentially problematic student conduct with an emphasis on issues and research relevant to basic communication courses at the college level and (2) to propose a research agenda for instructional communication scholars that links the work on undesirable student conduct to extant work on social allergens and motives, thereby extending existing knowledge about each topic.

Using anecdotal observations, some scholars group students into categories based upon their typical classroom behaviors (Allen & Rueter, 1990; Mann, et al., 1970; McKeachie, 2002); several of the categories represent students posing various difficulties for instructors (e.g., unprepared students; inattentive students; angry, aggressive, challenging students). McKeachie's (2002) chapter is useful because it offers a typology of problems

that teachers face with their college students accompanied by suggestions for dealing with each of them. Although cluster schemes (mentioned here as resources for interested readers) have intuitive appeal, the review portion of this piece focuses on several specific issues that occur in college classrooms.

## PARTICIPATION

One of the most pertinent concerns college teachers face is facilitating student participation. Particularly in discussion-oriented courses, issues surrounding students' willingness to speak and to share their ideas prompt utmost concern from instructors. Some instructors may find that getting participants to fill the void of silence between themselves and their students is their biggest challenge. After all, acquiring the skill of eliciting students' contributions is an important part of leading discussions—a popular method for teaching college courses (Cooper & Simonds, 2002; McKeachie, 2002).

Brookfield and Preskill (1999) provide nine possible explanations for students' failure to respond in class: (1) they are shy or introverted; (2) they are afraid that they will say something that makes them look foolish; (3) they feel unprepared, even if they have completed the required reading or assignment; (4) they are afraid the teacher will catch them making a mistake and jump at the opportunity to correct them; (5) they do not feel welcome in the academic environment; (6) they have had aversive experiences in their past attempts to contribute in class; (7) they are afraid of what their peers may

think of them if they speak; (8) they become dependent upon the teacher, expecting him or her to do the talking; and (9) they do not anticipate any reward for participating. Of these reasons, several may reflect personal traits, such as shyness, reticence, or communication apprehension (see Daly, McCroskey, Ayres, Hopf, & Ayres, 1997).

Communication apprehension noticeably connects with activities that occur in college classrooms, particularly in basic communication courses (e.g., Aitken & Neer, 1993; Allen & Bourhis, 1996; Ericson & Gardner, 1992; Hawkins & Stewart, 1991; Neer, 1992; Neer & Kircher, 1989; O'Mara, Allen, Long, & Judd, 1996). Cooper and Simonds (1999) explain the consequences of communication apprehension in the classroom where highly apprehensive students:

- (1) do not assume positions of leadership in groups;
- (2) do not volunteer to participate in classroom question and answer sessions;
- (3) drop classes requiring a large amount of communication;
- (4) are perceived by teachers as having less likelihood of success in almost every subject area regardless of intelligence, effort, or academic ability;
- (5) have low self-esteem;
- (6) express a preference for seating arrangements that inhibit communication interaction;
- (7) have lower grade point averages and score lower on student achievement tests than low communication-apprehensive students;
- (8) are more likely to drop out of school; and
- (9) generally avoid classroom discussions. (p. 238)

Communication apprehension, while far-reaching in its influence, is not the only reason students may be silent in class. As will be revealed in the literature on power and resistance, students who fail to interact in class

may do so in order to punish a teacher or to resist a teacher's influence attempt. Students who are shy, reticent, apprehensive, or feel motivated to avoid communication for any other reason can arouse concern among teachers who rely upon participation for teaching, as many basic communication course instructors do.

On the other hand, a teacher's greater challenge may be precluding the contributions of students who are more than happy to speak in class. Because teachers want students actively to be involved in their own learning (Sorcinelli, 1994) and because this culture rewards the quality of talkativeness (McCroskey & Richmond, 1995), it might seem surprising that teachers would want to squelch the voices of willing participants. However, teachers and students alike may find eager contributors to be annoying at the very least and disruptive at the extreme. Bostrom and Harrington (1999) observe, "There is a degree of talkativeness that goes far beyond the bounds of social acceptability and that many persons find to be highly unpleasant" (p. 73). Scholars consider such persons compulsive communicators or talkaholics (see McCroskey & Richmond, 1993, for the Talkaholic Scale; see Long, Fortney, & Johnson, 2000 for the TS-Observer Report, an observer measure of compulsive communication). These individuals may continue to be very talkative even if others greet them with negative repercussions (McCroskey & Richmond, 1993). Ifert, Long, and Fortney (1998) warn, however, that even within this group of talkative communicators, variation exists (e.g., they differ in their self-perceived communication competence, argumentativeness, and communication apprehension). In addition, they suggest, "Talkaholics may exacerbate reticent students' pat-

terns of low verbalness. Without intervention, talkaholics may enable other students to stagnate on competency development” and may stunt their own potential growth in communicative competence (Ifert, et al., 1998, p. 433). Indeed, Fortney, Johnson, and Long (2001) report that students taking basic communication courses with compulsive communicators in them show smaller increases in self-perceived communication competence than students in courses that do not contain compulsive communicators.

While students may differ in their perceptions of what constitutes involvement in a course (Bippus & Young, 2000), too much or too little communication interferes with the smooth functioning of a classroom and with the accomplishment of learning goals. Since both kinds of participation problems may occur within the same classroom (i.e., students who constantly remain silent and students who never seem to be), teachers must stretch their discussion-leading skills; they must simultaneously send messages that encourage quiet students and discourage overly talkative students. Cooper and Simonds (2002) and McKeachie (2002) offer some tips for teachers to follow when they encounter students that McKeachie (2002) labels “nonparticipants” and “discussion monopolizers.” Quantity of student participation (i.e., too much or too little) is certainly important in the college classroom, but the attitude with which students participate and the content of their participation are also vital for the establishment of a positive learning environment. Students who bring negativity into the classroom through their participation can create especially aversive situations both for their teachers and for their classmates.

## HOSTILITY, OPPOSITION, AND AGGRESSION

Downs' (1992) work addresses college students who are hostile and oppositional. Hostile students, according to Downs (1992), "are those who have, not a chip on their shoulder, but a mountain and attack people rather than issues, with intent to harm" (p. 106). For such students, the classroom may be used for catharsis – as a venue for expressing negative emotions and attitudes (e.g., anger, frustration, aggression). They convey an attitude of superiority both to the teacher and to the other students, and they are eager to "pick a fight." Downs (1992) defines an oppositional student as "one who argues for argument's sake and sees conflict as a form of stimulating communication," but warns that this type of student may present a façade that is charming (p. 106). She illustrates the behaviors of hostile and oppositional students using brief examples of particular students she has encountered: one who entered and exited class with a friendly air, but verbally attacked classmates when they expressed their opinions; one who was never disruptive with her "passive-aggressive" opposition in class, but then bombarded Downs with criticisms of her grading procedures using emotional intensity and unfounded information; and finally, one who enjoyed quarreling over examples and statistics that Downs presented and harping on the mistakes other students made by attacking, criticizing, and insulting them. While Downs (1992) distinguishes hostile and oppositional students conceptually, she does not neatly differentiate the two types of students in the examples she provides. However, she concludes her

discussion of these issues by offering some practical steps teachers can take to address the dilemmas associated with hostile and oppositional students.

Although Downs (1992) does not acknowledge the connection in her work, her definition of hostile students overlaps considerably the definition that Infante and Wigley (1986) provide for verbal aggressiveness (VA): “A personality trait that predisposes persons to attack the self-concepts of other people instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication” (p. 61). A noteworthy collection of studies relating to instructors’ VA in the classroom exists (Myers, 1998, 2001, 2002; Myers & Knox, 1999, 2000; Myers & Rocca, 2000, 2001; Rocca & McCroskey, 1999; Schrodts, 2003). However, still deserving of research attention from instructional communication scholars is *students’* VA in the classroom (both toward their teachers and toward their classmates). Given that VA may take a variety of potentially odious forms (e.g., attacks on others’ character or competence; messages including insults, teasing, ridicule, or profane language; offensive nonverbal emblems; Infante & Wigley, 1986) and that it produces harmful outcomes (Rancer, Whitecap, Kosberg, & Avtgis, 1997), it represents not only a teacher “misbehavior” (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991), but also an undesirable student behavior. Research related to incidents involving students’ VA (perceived by instructors and students and observed by coders present during actual class sessions) could offer tremendous insights into the nature of the awkward and detrimental classroom episodes VA facilitates.

Due to its heuristic potential, Schrodts’s (2003) piece on VA merits emphasis here. His research indicates

students who report moderate or high levels of trait VA perceive their instructors as engaging in more verbally aggressive behaviors than students who report low levels of VA. In addition, his study provides evidence that students who report low or moderate levels of self-esteem perceive their instructors as engaging in more verbally aggressive behaviors than students who report high levels of self-esteem. If Schrodts's (2003) findings involving the perceptual tendencies exhibited by the students in his sample could be replicated among faculty members, then his conclusions would have important implications not only for classroom dynamics related to student behaviors, but also for classroom outcomes related to instructor behaviors. Specifically, this would mean instructors' own characteristics, such as their propensities toward VA and their levels of self-esteem, could bias their interpretations of students' behavior such that they would be more or less likely to perceive students' communication as verbally aggressive and/or as justified (Martin, Anderson, & Horvath, 1996). These perceptions, in turn, should shape instructors' responses to students' messages (e.g., ignoring them, laughing, becoming angry, confronting the students outside of class), and therefore warrant further research.

## **POWER AND RESISTANCE**

Golish (1999) recognizes students as powerful social agents, rather than passive and reactionary entities in the classroom, by extending the line of research on teacher-focused power in the classroom (Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1984, 1985; Kearney, Plax,

Sorensen, & Smith, 1988; McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; McCroskey, Richmond, Plax, & Kearney, 1985; Plax, Kearney, & Downs, 1986; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Plax, Kearney, & Tucker, 1986; Richmond, 1990; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, & Plax, 1987; Roach, 1991) to include students' attempts to gain compliance from Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs). She reports an inductively derived typology of students' strategies for gaining compliance in classes taught by GTAs. She considers many of the messages students indicated that they would use prosocial (e.g., honesty, flattery, evidence of preparation, performance).

Particularly relevant to this piece, however, are antisocial strategies. Golish and Olson (2000) designate the following behavior alteration techniques (BATs) and their accompanying behavioral alteration messages (BAMs) as antisocial: *blame* (e.g., students claim that a teacher did not explain an assignment sufficiently), *complaining* (e.g., students claim that they have too much work in their other classes), *public persuasion* (e.g., students intentionally attempt to persuade the teacher in front of other students to make it more challenging for the teacher to decline), *emotional displays* (e.g., students manipulate their facial expressions to appear very sad), *general excuses* (e.g., students claim that they are sick or had a computer problem), *punishing the teacher* (e.g., students provide the teacher with lower evaluations or threaten to do so), *reference to higher authority* (e.g., students threaten to speak with the department chair or the dean), and *verbal force/demand* (e.g., students claim that they deserve a higher grade and that the teacher needs to change a current

grade). Understandably, teachers whose students blame, punish, threaten, or otherwise approach them using an antisocial BAM could perceive the situation as difficult. Students *report* using prosocial messages more frequently than antisocial messages (Golish, 1999; Golish & Olson, 2000), but future research should examine their actual messages to corroborate their perceptions. Students not only attempt to influence teachers' behavior, but they also seek to resist teachers' attempts to influence their own behavior.

In a college class comprised of 30 students, a teacher can expect to encounter six or seven students who "refuse to go along with something the teacher wants them to do," according to Plax and Kearney (1999), who remind readers that one or two students can ruin an entire class for others (p. 269). Adult students have a broad range of techniques that they can use to resist teachers' attempts to influence them. Burroughs, et al. (1989) report a typology of compliance-resistance strategies created by college students. Students read scenarios in which a teacher attempted to influence them to come to class more prepared, and they wrote messages they would use to resist the teacher's influence attempt. The messages they generated represented 19 categories: (1) *teacher advice* (e.g., you should relate more with students before trying to give any advice), (2) *teacher blame* (e.g., you don't seem prepared yourself), (3) *avoidance* (e.g., I won't participate as much), (4) *reluctant compliance* (e.g., I'll come prepared but not interested at all), (5) *active resistance* (e.g., I'll continue to come unprepared to get on the teacher's nerves), (6) *deception* (e.g., I may be prepared, but play dumb for spite), (7) *direct communication* (e.g., I would tell the

teacher of the communication problem he/she has), (8) *disruption* (e.g., I'll talk to friends in class while the teacher is lecturing), (9) *excuses* (e.g., I can remember things without writing stuff down), (10) *ignoring the teacher* (e.g., I would simply let the teacher's request go in one ear and out the other), (11) *priorities* (e.g., this class is not as important as my others), (12) *challenge the teacher's basis of power* (e.g., no one else is doing it, so why should I have to?), (13) *rally student support* (e.g., get the rest of the class to support my behavior that the teacher is trying to change), (14) *appeal to powerful others* (e.g., I might complain to the department head that this instructor is incompetent and can't motivate the class), (15) *modeling teacher behavior* (e.g., I would participate more if you were more enthusiastic about what you're doing), (16) *modeling teacher affect* (e.g., you don't seem to care about this class, why should I?), (17) *hostile defensive* (e.g., tell the teacher that my behavior is my business), (18) *student rebuttal* (e.g., I'm doing fine right now without changing my behavior), and (19) *revenge* (e.g., I'll express my dissatisfaction with the teacher/course on evaluations at the end of the term) (see Burroughs, et al., 1989 for more details and examples corresponding to the 19 categories of compliance-resistance techniques).

Burroughs et al. (1989) derived this typology inductively, and, as a consequence, it may not reflect typical resistance messages employed by students. Specifically, some of the messages seem more representative of comments that a very small number of students would write in an anonymous survey or teacher evaluation than messages students would deliver directly and verbally to a teacher (e.g., you should relate more with stu-

dents before trying to give any advice, you don't seem prepared yourself). However, this research reveals that students have many resistance strategies mentally available to them when they do not wish to comply with teachers' wishes. Future research could address which of these messages students typically use.

Burroughs, et al. (1989) define student resistance as "either constructive or destructive oppositional behavior" (p. 216). Although their conceptualization allows for resistance that helps or hurts the classroom environment, research on resistance in the classroom (Burroughs, et al., 1989; Kearney & Plax, 1992; Kearney, Plax, & Burroughs, 1991; Kearney, Plax, Smith, & Sorensen, 1988; Lee, Levine, & Cambra, 1997; Plax & Kearney, 1999) sends the implied message that resistance is undesirable (e.g., a reference to the "good news" concerning the possibility of preventing student resistance by making proactive teacher choices). This is understandable, given that several of the BAMs reported by Golish and Olson (2000) and several of the resistance messages created by students in Burroughs, et al.'s sample mirror the kind of hostile, oppositional, and/or verbally aggressive behaviors discussed previously.

## **CHALLENGE BEHAVIOR**

Similarly, college teachers may typically view challenge behavior as undesirable in their classes. Challenge behavior happens "when a student behaves contrary to implicit or explicit classroom expectations" and may occur because students are unsure about a teacher's expectations or a teacher's intent to enact

stated consequences for behaviors that violate certain expectations (Cooper & Simonds, 1999, p. 229). Simonds (1997) distinguishes challenge behavior from the resistance behaviors just discussed, saying, "Student resistance is a response to teacher influence attempts, whereas challenge behavior is a response to uncertainty" (p. 483). Simonds views challenge behavior as a potential impetus for creating a better classroom climate.

Cooper and Simonds (2002) provide a slightly modified version of Simonds' (1997) refined critical incidents frequency report. This checklist asks students to think about the class they just attended and to remember how often they have noticed the listed behaviors occurring in that class. They then check very often, often, sometimes, almost never, or never in response to a sentence beginning "generally, students" and ending with these critical incidents: are absent excessively, beg for higher grades in class, question instructor's knowledge of content, question the relevance of tasks to everyday life, want to receive full credit for late work, compare scores with other students, attempt to control when a task will be done, question the importance of subject matter, offer "off the wall" examples in class discussion, question fairness of grading, don't want to participate, complain that theories do not apply to real life, come to class late, question grades on assignments, attempt to embarrass the instructor, question why the class should be required, talk during class, argue over test questions, interrupt instructor to reinforce their own opinion, and question relevance of concepts being discussed.

Simonds (1997) explains that critical incidents related to classroom behavior represent several different

kinds of challenges: evaluation challenges, procedural challenges, practicality challenges, and power play challenges. An *evaluation challenge* happens when a student calls into question the way a teacher tests or grades. A *procedural challenge* occurs when a student tries to test explicit or implicit classroom norms or rules (for implications of procedural justice on student motivation, affective learning, and student aggression toward course instructors, see Chory-Assad, 2002). A *practicality challenge* takes place when a student calls into question the applicability of the course or course activities. Finally, a *power play challenge* transpires when a student attempts to influence the teacher's or other students' behavior in class. While Simonds (1997) views these behaviors as student attempts to achieve clarity regarding teacher expectations, the previous sections on hostility and resistance each suggest that some behaviors not expected in a classroom occur due to the personal characteristics of students or to their purposeful attempt not to meet known expectations.

## CHEATING

Students not guilty of some kind of academic dishonesty are atypical (Hollinger & Lanza-Kaduce, 1996). Although self-report estimates vary (i.e., 75 to 85%), most students admit to having cheated in college (Aiken, 1991; Davis, 1993; Genereux & McLeod, 1995; McCabe & Trevino, 1996). Whether students cheat because of competition, anxiety concerning grades, perceptions of teachers or exams as unfair, peer pressure, stress, environmental conditions (e.g., large classrooms

with many students and few proctors), intellectual or personality characteristics, a lack of understanding of which behaviors constitute cheating, level of moral development, or for other reasons, it is apparent that the problem of academic dishonesty exists at the college level (Barnett & Dalton, 1981; Davis, 1993; McCabe & Trevino, 1996).

Students have a variety of behavioral strategies at their disposal when they wish to cheat. McKeachie (2002) identifies eight ways in which students may go about cheating: (1) passing information to another student, sometimes using an eraser; (2) using notes written upon their skin, clothing, or little cards; (3) storing answers in a calculator or cassette recorder brought to the exam; (4) peeking at the exam of a fellow student; (5) using a hand code or tapping system; (6) accusing the teacher of having lost an exam that was never given to the teacher; (7) paying another person to complete an exam or paper; and (8) copying or paraphrasing information without giving appropriate credit. Davis, Grover, Becker, and McGregor (1992) report that 80% of those who had cheated in their sample had done so either by copying information from a neighbor's work or by using crib notes. The other 20% of cheaters reported the following cheating techniques: (1) use of a system involving hand and feet positions; (2) use of a desk-touching system, with each corner of the desk standing for a letter – A, B, C, and D; (3) use of a copy of the test to prepare ahead of time; (4) use of another student's exam, traded during the testing period; (5) use of a book opened during the testing period to find answers; (6) use of a calculator hidden in the student's pants; (7) use of a walkman during the testing period, with answers re-

corded on a tape; (8) use of the student's arm for writing answers or use of the student's mouth to hold a plastic bag containing answers; and (9) use of a paper flower pinned on the student's blouse containing written answers.

Until recently, published research had not addressed cheating in the communication classroom. However, Holm (2002) confirms that students cheat on performance-based coursework by engaging in a variety of specific behaviors (e.g., presenting a summary of an article as a speech, inventing bibliographic information, changing information found in research to improve a speech). Over half of the students in Holm's sample reported that they engaged in at least one form of cheating in their public speaking class. Research shows that cheating occurs in college classrooms, and it can be achieved in more innovative ways than teachers might imagine or detect. But perhaps more disturbing than the prevalence of cheating among college students, or the failure of students who are aware of their classmates' cheating to report their peers (Baldwin, Daugherty, Rowley, & Schwarz, 1996), is the failure of faculty members to punish students they have *caught* in the act of cheating (Graham, Monday, O'Brien, & Steffen, 1994; Jendrek, 1989). Holm (2002) admonishes instructors: "Cheating undermines the educational process and as members of the academic community we have an obligation to seek ways to prevent cheating" (p. 74).

## EXCUSE MAKING

Caron, Whitbourne, and Halgin (1992) define a fraudulent excuse as “one that the student fabricated specifically for the purpose of avoiding academic responsibility” and a legitimate excuse as “one based on events beyond the student’s control and that prevented the student from fulfilling the expected task” (p. 90). They used self-report information from undergraduate students to compare the frequency of fraudulent and legitimate excuses used for such goals as receiving a time extension for a paper or postponing an examination. In their investigation, 68% of students admitted that they had used one or more fraudulent excuses during college. Of this sample portion, 90% reported that the teacher accepted their excuse. Most made up the excuse in order to receive extra time.

A comparison of frequencies for the excuse given (i.e., personal illness, family emergency, did not understand assignment, alarm failed/overslept, left paper in dorm, out of town, computer failed, grandparent death, best friend death, and other) indicated that students use the particular kinds of excuses in a nearly equivalent fashion for fraudulent and legitimate excuses. However, students claim family emergencies more often for fraudulent excuses than legitimate ones. In addition, students use the grandparent death excuse legitimately more often than they use it as a fraudulent excuse. Despite the fact that fraudulent and legitimate excuses appear to be used relatively equally, student reports suggest that teachers rarely require any proof that the stated excuse is authentic. Given this lack of account-

ability, it is not surprising that 69% of those using fraudulent excuses reported that they would use the same or a different fraudulent excuse in the future. Factors making it more likely that students will make up excuses include perceiving the teacher as lenient, knowing the teacher well, having a young professor, being in a large class, and being in a lower level class. Based on their findings, Caron, et al. (1992) provide suggestions for teachers dealing with college student excuse making and conclude: "College teachers first must make the unpleasant admission that fraudulent excuse making is a common and successful practice" (p. 92).

Thus far, this piece contains a review and discussion of several particular behaviors that could be considered troublesome within the college classroom. The work of many authors contributes to this area of study, which makes organization of the issues unsystematic. However, two instructional communication scholars offer a scheme that simplifies the complex array of information. Based upon previous research on college students' resistance efforts (e.g., Burroughs, et al., 1989; Kearney, et al., 1991), Plax and Kearney (1999) advance overarching labels for two types of classroom misbehaviors: active and passive. *Active misbehaviors* are those that blatantly disrupt the learning environment. In this category, they include "cheating, asking counter-productive questions, challenging the teacher's authority, diverting classroom talk from the lesson, interrupting, leaving class early (or walking in late), and talking with friends" (Plax & Kearney, 1999, p. 271). *Passive misbehaviors* represent more concealed actions and include "inattention to teacher, lack of attendance,

turning in assignments late (or not at all), sleeping through class, and reading the newspaper or doing other 'more important' homework in class" (Plax & Kearney, 1999, p. 271). This framework provides a parsimonious way to classify students' behaviors and could easily be expanded to incorporate other relevant issues.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

The preceding sections include examinations of research using primarily a descriptive approach, but some work in this topic area focuses on prevention and clarity efforts (e.g., Cooper & Simonds, 2002; Emmer, Evertson, Sanford, Clements, & Worsham, 1984; Evertson, 1989; Kounin, 1970; Sorcinelli, 1994). Many scholars advocate a proactive approach in which teachers plan carefully in advance their goals, rules, methods, and so forth, so that they will be prepared for what occurs when a class begins and so they can decrease the likelihood that students will feel the need to engage in aversive behaviors. As Sorcinelli (1994) explains, prevention is preferable to confrontation.

Because even teachers who attempt to prevent undesirable student conduct encounter it, some scholarly work extends beyond description or prevention to include recommendations. For example, when dealing with hostile or oppositional students, Downs (1992) suggests that teachers: ask themselves if they have done anything to contribute to the conflict, confer with the student privately in a neutral place, find some common ground, try several cooperative learning techniques and talk about social skills, avoid taking attacks personally

or being defensive with the student, talk with colleagues about how they have handled such students or situations, integrate problem-solving and conflict resolution exercises into their regular class sessions, and use direct confrontation only as a last resort. Sorcinelli (1994) offers strategies for dealing with some specific troublesome issues: talking and inattention; unpreparedness and missed deadlines; lateness and inattendance; and challenges to authority. Singhai and Johnson (1983) present suggestions for deterring dishonest student behaviors. As a final example, McKeachie's (2002) entire book provides tips for addressing "problem students."

This term begs discussion of an important point – the recognition that teachers and students exert mutual influence in the college classroom (a transactional view of communication), and therefore must accept shared responsibility for what occurs there (e.g., Appleby, 1990; Downs, 1992; Kearney & Plax, 1992; McKeachie, 2002; Plax & Kearney, 1999). While giving certain groups of students the collective label "problem students," McKeachie (2002) carefully avoids pinning all of the blame for unwanted behaviors on the students, saying,

It is human nature for us to perceive the problem as the student; but before focusing on changing the student's behavior, take a few moments to look at what you [the teacher] are doing that might be related to the student's behavior. Interpersonal problems involve at least two people, and in many cases the difficulties are not one-sided. (p. 148)

In fact, some researchers attribute student behavioral problems largely to the (mis)behaviors of college teachers (Appleby, 1990; Eble, 1983; Kearney, et al.,

1991; Kelsey, Kearney, Plax, Allen, & Ritter, 2004; Roach, 1997; Thweatt & McCroskey, 1996, 1998).

Kearney et al. (1991) identify three categories of teachers who commit misbehaviors: *incompetent* teachers (i.e., those who are confusing, apathetic, unfair, or boring; those who provide too much information, do not know subject matter, have noticeable accents, speak at an inappropriate volume, or use poor spelling or grammar), *offensive* teachers (i.e., those who use sarcasm or putdowns, are verbally abusive, follow unreasonable or arbitrary rules, engage in sexual harassment, have a negative personality, or show favoritism or prejudice), and *indolent* teachers (i.e., those who are absent, tardy, unprepared or disorganized; those who deviate from the syllabus, return student work late, or do not provide sufficient information). Students have specific expectations for teachers' communication (Frymier & Weser, 2001); they consider incompetent, offensive, or indolent behaviors norm violations (Berkos, Allen, Kearney, & Plax, 2001).

Current instructional communication research indicates that students may respond negatively to teachers who use coercive power in the classroom (Golish & Olson, 2000), display verbal aggressiveness in the classroom (Myers & Knox, 1999; Myers & Rocca, 2001), express nonnormative anger in the classroom (McPherson, Kearney, & Plax, 2003), or who students perceive as being homosexual (Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002). Importantly, college students attribute teacher misbehaviors to teachers, rather than to themselves or to external factors (Kelsey, et al., 2004). It is imperative, then, for teachers to recognize that they, as well as students, bring characteristics and behaviors to the class-

room that shape climate outcomes (i.e., classroom settings entail interdependent, transactional communication; Miller & Burgoon, 1978).

Despite the importance of examining classroom problems from a mutual influence and culpability perspective, some student behaviors necessitate teacher intervention if classes are to function smoothly. Cooper and Simonds (1999) advise teachers not to intervene each time they observe a problem in their classrooms, but suggest: "When behavior continues or threatens to spread to other students, [a teacher] can no longer ignore it" (p. 231). Discipline, however, is not the ideal "treatment" for behaviors that cannot be ignored (Plax & Kearney, 1999; Wlodkowski, 1982). Evertson (1989) warns that time spent on discipline efforts during class has a negative association with student achievement and simultaneously usurps instructional time from teachers. Given this, it seems that student issues warranting confrontation should be discussed with the relevant student(s) outside of class time. Instructional scholars have not given attention to such private efforts of teachers to influence their students' behaviors. In fact, despite the benefits of out-of-class (OOC) communication (e.g., higher student retention rates, better developed educational goals and career plans, greater satisfaction with experiences in college, superior intellectual and personal development), OOC communication between college teachers and their students is low in frequency (Fusani, 1994; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Nadler & Nadler, 2000, 2001). No research to date on OOC communication addresses teacher-initiated OOC communication regarding individual students' undesirable classroom-related behaviors. Future research endeavors

could offer useful information on OOC communication in general and, more specifically, on OOC communication related to teachers' efforts to alter student conduct. Two other suggestions for future research warrant detailed discussion and comprise an anticipated research agenda for teacher scholars. The proposed topics represent attempts to meld instructional communication research on undesirable student conduct with other existing lines of research in an effort to extend knowledge on each.

## **SOCIAL ALLERGENS IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM**

One line of research that should be extended to the classroom setting specifically, in order to advance our understanding of particularly difficult student behaviors and their consequences, is Cunningham, Barbee, and Druen's (1997) work on social allergens. They define a social allergen as "a behavior or situation created by another person that may be seen as unpleasant, but not as strongly aversive, to objective observers" (p. 191). Due to multiple encounters or especially long periods of contact with a social allergen, a person may develop a social allergy — an overly sensitive response involving disgust or annoyance when faced with a social allergen.

In surveys used to establish research on social allergens, Cunningham and his colleagues prompted respondents to think of "people whom you cannot stand to be around, who drive you crazy without them necessarily intending to do so"; and they indicated that respondents should consider "situations in which you have such strong feelings toward a person that it takes very little

for the person to irritate, offend you, or cause physical symptoms” (Cunningham, et al., 1997, p. 193). Of the people identified as prompting such reactions, 49% represented relationships with the respondents that were involuntary; 17% were bosses or teachers. If instructors were asked to complete a survey like this, it is likely that some responses would reveal social allergies involving students. In fact, Appleby (1990) reports a content analysis of faculty members’ lists of irritating student behaviors and indicates three broad categories distinguishing them: *immature behaviors* (e.g., talking during lectures; creating disturbances; arriving late), *inattentive behaviors* (e.g., sleeping during class; acting bored or apathetic; being unprepared), and *miscellaneous irritating behaviors* (e.g., asking, “Will this be on the test?”: providing unbelievable excuses). While these actions may be irritating, they do not capture the full range of potentially aversive conduct that could prompt social allergies in the classroom. For instance, Davis and Schmidt (1977) detail a range of behaviors that people may consider obnoxious (e.g., appearance, voice, smell), many of which could occur in class settings. Also, the categories in Appleby’s (1990) study stem from instructors’ perceptions, and they, therefore, do not depict student behaviors that other students find irritating.

The typical classroom context exposes teachers *and* students to at least a few persons whom they otherwise would not choose as interaction partners. The regular contact facilitated by class meetings secures the potential for social allergies to develop, particularly among classes requiring regular interaction or among small classes in which students (and teachers) cannot easily ignore or avoid specific students. The importance of in-

vestigating the phenomena surrounding obnoxious or allergy-inducing student behaviors lies partially in their ambiguity when compared to more blatantly wrong actions — and, therefore, students' and teachers' potential helplessness when attempting to justify reactions to them. Whereas deliberate cheating witnessed by an instructor could justly result in a student receiving a failing grade in a course or dismissal from a university, formal university procedures do not mandate consequences for behaviors that irritate others. This leaves the task of reprimanding irritating students to the instructor, and, at times, to the other students (e.g., during work on a group project). However, teachers and students may or may not agree upon which types of conduct (and corresponding students) necessitate reproof. Instructors may mirror the affect experienced by their students; however, they may also have experience with students who are noticeably impetuses of allergies for most other students, but who do not induce an allergy for them.

What distinguishes the types of students and student behaviors that prompt universally allergic reactions from teachers and students from those that prompt teacher-specific and student-specific allergies? What degree of overlap exists between students' and teachers' assessments of which student or students in a particular class trigger social allergies? Are students who provoke allergic reactions in one of their classes likely to incite them in all of their classes? To what extent would outside observers be able to detect the allergens perceived by teachers and students in a class, and how likely is it that their observations would coincide with those of the teachers and/or the students? Cun-

ningham et al.'s (1997) definition of social allergens specifically states that certain behaviors or situations could be seen as unpleasant to objective observers, but not nearly as unpleasant as to those possessing an allergy. This makes necessary research examining multiple perspectives on social allergens in the classroom context. One of the most important questions our research could answer is this: What outcomes associate with perceptions of classroom social allergens held by (a) students, (b) teachers, and (c) outside observers?

Another issue that may be important for future research involves the spreading of affect toward social allergens. Specifically, to what extent does "emotional contagion" (see Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994) occur with respect to social allergies developed by persons in classroom settings? Many instructors can recall students who have generated enthusiastic waves of collective class eye rolling, head turning, or other expressions of disgust. When one student rolls his eyes as soon as a specific student begins to speak, by what process does the affect manifested in his expression spread or fail to spread to other students and/or the instructor?

It can be face threatening to a student whose actions are annoying to be greeted with disgusted responses from students or teachers and for an annoyed student to attack openly the offending person. As a result, "the obnoxious are—and perhaps will remain—the last minority group to suffer discrimination" (Davis & Schmidt, 1977, p. 212). On the other hand, it can also be face threatening both to the teacher and to other students if they encourage the person associated with the allergy-inducing behavior(s) in any way. The instructor in particular bears the burden of being respectful while not

endorsing the student's conduct and, at the same time, of masking his or own frustration. This challenge may, in effect, force the instructor to discard each annoyance into his or her metaphorical gunnysack; for an instructor with a low threshold for withholding annoyance, too many grievances experienced over the course of a semester (or over several semesters) could lead to an outburst of anger toward the unsuspecting student (Bach & Wyden, 1970). Since students perceive nonnormative anger from instructors negatively (McPherson, et al., 2003), and since social allergies involving students could prompt nonnormative anger from instructors via gunnysacking, further research on social allergies developed by instructors could offer important information to the body of research related to instructors' communication.

We know, anecdotally, that obnoxious, annoying, rude, insensitive, and/or incompetent students can make going to class a chore for teachers and students alike. They may even ruin the class for some. We do not know the complex facets of the perceptual and behavioral processes associated with social allergens or social allergies in the classroom. For instance, we do not know what strategies teachers and fellow students use to deal with especially aversive students or how successful their endeavors are. We also do not know whether offending students accurately perceive such efforts. Such knowledge might help students and teachers change their perceptions, their behaviors, and their classroom experiences radically. As indicated in the preceding discussion, there is much potential in this research avenue. Rather than answering questions, the goal in this section was to raise questions for instructional communication scholars to consider and to stimulate interest in in-

vestigations that connect social allergen research to everyday, frustrating classroom experiences. Attention now turns to another prospective research angle that could extend our understanding of difficult classroom situations.

## MOTIVES IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

Schutz (1966) advanced arguments for a Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO) that suggests people have three interpersonal needs that influence their behavior: inclusion, control, and affection. Referencing Schutz's writing and other scholars' work on communication functions (e.g., Bochner, 1984; Dance & Larson, 1979), Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988) delineate weaknesses of relying exclusively upon a functional approach (i.e., one providing descriptions and categories of phenomena) to studying communication: one behavior may perform multiple functions, assumptions made using observation can be flawed, and perceptions of actors and targets may provide more valuable information for understanding outcomes of a communicative event than would observations from outsiders. Therefore, they advocate examining people's interpersonal communication motives using objectives mirroring those of mass communication scholars who rely upon Uses and Gratifications Theory. This perspective enables scholars to investigate individuals' media use by probing the needs they meet with particular media choices (e.g., Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rosen- gren, 1974).

In studies stemming from this view, Rubin, et al. (1988) identified six interpersonal communication motives: *pleasure* (e.g., communicating for fun), *affection* (e.g., communicating to help other people or to demonstrate care and concern for others' feelings), *inclusion* (e.g., communicating to reduce feelings of loneliness or to develop relationships), *escape* (e.g., communicating to avoid other activities), *relaxation* (e.g., communicating to relieve stress), and *control* (e.g., communicating to gain compliance from other people). Their work resulted in reliable 28-item and 18-item scales for measuring interpersonal communication motives. Although scholars view these motives as reasonably stable individual characteristics (Graham, Barbato, & Perse, 1993), people exhibit different motives depending upon the context (Rubin & Martin, 1998). Therefore, researchers began exploring motives in a variety of contexts (e.g., families, romantic relationships, organizations, groups, classrooms).

Particularly relevant to this piece is the recent line of research conducted by instructional communication scholars on students' motives for communicating with their college instructors (Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 2000; Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999, 2002; Martin, Valencic, & Heisel, 2002; Mottet, Martin, & Myers, 2004; Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002a, 2002b; Myers, Mottet, & Martin, 2000). Martin, et al. (1999) initiated the body of published research on classroom-specific motives. The 54 reasons that students in their study listed for communicating with their college-level instructors (e.g., because I find her interesting, to clarify the material, to demonstrate I understand the material, to explain absences, to brown nose) represented five different factors.

The motives reflected were: *relate* (i.e., communicating in an attempt to build relationships with teachers), *function* (i.e., communicating in order to learn about course content or assignments), *participation* (i.e., communicating to display interest in the class or understanding of course content), *excuse* (i.e., communicating to justify missing or late work or to challenge the teacher concerning grades or grading criteria), and *sycophancy* (i.e., communicating to create a good impression on the teacher or to gain his or her approval). This study is important because it provides evidence that in addition to communicating for general interpersonal communication motives, students communicate with contextual, class-related motives.

Researchers have subsequently explored students' communication motives to determine their connections to perceived instructor communication style (Myers, et al., 2000); student affective and cognitive learning (Martin, et al., 2000); student use of information-seeking strategies (Myers, et al., 2002a); instructor socio-communicative style, student socio-communicative orientation, and student gender (Myers, et al., 2002b); student communication apprehension (Martin, et al., 2002); and perceived instructor verbal approach and avoidance relational strategies (Mottet, et al., 2004). Although this body of research supplies a rich set of information relating to motives students have for communicating with instructors, it does not offer precise or comprehensive insights into students' communication endeavors that instructors consider negative. It also does not tap into students' motives related to other students; however, some undesirable classroom behaviors link to goals involving peers (e.g., cheating by using hand signals with

a partner during an exam, saying something risqué to make classmates laugh).

The excuse and sycophancy motives offer a glimpse into aversive behaviors, but they are not exhaustive, nor do they take into account motives related to other students. Therefore, while some of the motives identified for communicating with instructors (i.e., relate, function, participation, excuse, sycophancy) certainly bear obvious connections to the types of student conduct discussed in the literature, these motive categories do not seem sufficient for understanding reasons underlying the full range of specific student misbehaviors. To increase our understanding of the nature of misbehaviors in the college classroom, researchers should consider both students' reports of their motives and teachers' reports of motives they attribute to students.

Research should address students' perceptions of why they engage in insufficient or excessive participation; why they exhibit hostile, oppositional, or aggressive conduct; why they resist teachers' influence attempts; why they challenge their instructors on grades, procedures, and practicality issues, or use power plays; why they cheat; why they make excuses and so forth. Perhaps in addition to general motives and context-specific motives, we would discover situation-specific motives even within one context (i.e., the classroom). Investigations involving students' motives would enable us to test, at least partially, some of the assumptions scholars make regarding particular behaviors (e.g., Simonds' reasoning that challenge behavior is a result of student uncertainty concerning teacher expectations; Simonds, 1997). The ideological and methodological issues entangled with this research will not be discussed here.

In addition to students' attributions for their behaviors, we should examine instructors' attributions of students' motives. In other words, what reasons do instructors *think* students have for engaging in the myriad undesirable classroom behaviors? These perceptions are of particular import given that teachers' behaviors likely reflect assumptions they make regarding students' conduct. Motives that instructors attribute to students' behaviors should shape their specific subsequent communication behaviors. Certain motives could shape the decision to confront a student and the approach an instructor uses during confrontation. Specifically, if an instructor attributes a malevolent motive, rather than a benevolent motive, he or she would probably be more likely to discuss consequences for behavior with the student (e.g., how it could affect the student's grade) than to discuss how he or she (i.e., the instructor) could make expectations clearer to the student. In addition to examining motives instructors attribute to students, we could enhance our understanding of behavioral dynamics in education by investigating instructors' perceptions of their own motives for responding to student behaviors.

As an example, research reviewed in this piece on cheating and excuse making suggests that instructors seem prone to giving students "the benefit of the doubt"; this tendency only serves to exacerbate problems of student cheating and excuse making, which helps explain why so many students report being repeat offenders and indicate a willingness to try the same sort of offense again in the future. The fact that teachers rarely punish cheaters and rarely require documentation from students with excuses indicates a serious problem in the

education system. It would be enlightening, then, to determine instructors' reasons for ignoring dishonest or potentially dishonest behaviors and for failing to confront students who have been witnessed while engaging in offenses. Are their motives for overlooking unethical behavior based upon their perceptions of students' motives for engaging in the behavior? Research should address this issue.

A final illustration of how motives might be connected with research on aversive student conduct relates to verbally aggressive student messages. Several reasons for VA exist (i.e., frustration, social learning, psychopathology, argumentative skill deficiency; Infante & Wigley, 1986), but scholars have not investigated students' motives for using it in the classroom. Even though researchers consider VA a trait-like variable, more important for understanding classroom dynamics than stable reasons behind the phenomenon may be the attributions that both students and instructors make for students' use of verbally aggressive messages. Many opportunities beyond those discussed in this section remain for research connecting motives and problematic student behaviors; the ideas provided here should serve as an impetus for such projects. This line of research is important because, as Plax and Kearney (1990) argue, "understanding *why* [italics added] students misbehave is crucial for coping with or managing students when they engage in resistance" (p. 226).

## CONCLUSION

In their assessment of communication behaviors perceived by teachers as inappropriate for the classroom, Trenholm and Rose (1981) make a claim that this piece echoes: “Whether these...behaviors are things that teachers *should* be attending to is not at issue. They are the things that teachers *do* attend to” (p. 14). It is useful for teachers and teacher educators to be as informed as possible on the myriad behaviors that may be problematic in the classroom so that they can prepare themselves to address them. With the realization that students report cheating, giving fraudulent excuses repeatedly, and so forth, without consequence, we can no longer afford to undermine the ideals of the educational system by giving students the benefit of the doubt as the rule, rather than the exception. We also cannot afford to entrust the task of teaching the basic course to GTAs without equipping them with training that includes preparation for the “harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life.”

Those who teach basic communication courses are often inexperienced GTAs (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990; Williams & Roach, 1993). As such, these instructors may be particularly prone to experience reality shock concerning the complex and challenging realities of classroom phenomena, including those requiring discipline or other management efforts (Veenman, 1984). GTAs often harbor concerns related to their “ambiguous ‘in between’ status [that] may leave [them] open to more conflictual experiences and situations than those faced by full-time faculty” (Galvin, 1990, p. 204). These con-

cerns should be matched with relevant training experiences. Buerkel-Rothfuss and Fink (1993) indicate professionalism as the factor that determines whether students perceive GTAs as being equally credible as tenure-track faculty. Anticipating, recognizing, and addressing undesirable student behaviors should be an integral focus of teacher training programs that seek to enhance instructors' credibility and professionalism. Course directors, GTAs, and other instructors of basic communication courses should resist the temptation to skew their preparation for teaching toward learning content (Plax & Kearney, 1990, 1999), strategies, and duties (Roach, 1991). Just as important for effective teaching is maintaining a learning climate in which both teachers and students can thrive. The research agenda advanced in this piece proposes connecting the study of aversive student conduct with extant work on social allergens and motives. This avenue provides an opportunity for new and experienced teacher scholars to make valuable contributions to the body of instructional communication research that attempts to aid teachers in creating better classroom environments for their students and for themselves.

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