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## Facilitating Students' Motivation in the Basic Communication Course: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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### Cover Page Footnote

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## Research Article

# Facilitating Students' Motivation in the Basic Communication Course: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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### Abstract

*Given that students may not find inherent value in their general education courses, and in particular, the basic communication course (BCC), the current study was aimed at exploring the instructor behaviors that students identify as enhancing their motivation within this context. Specifically, the purpose of the current study was to qualitatively explore instructor behaviors and student motivation in the BCC, specifically through the lens of self-determination theory. Open-ended responses from students currently enrolled in a basic communication course resulted in 28 themes, which were organized by student needs of relatedness, autonomy, and competence. Relatedness themes were most frequently reported, with particular emphasis on instructors' positive teaching style and course content relevance. Practical implications based on student responses are offered for BCC instructors.*

### Introduction

The basic communication course (BCC), across its many adaptations, focuses on the enhancement of oral communication and/or writing skills typically aimed at first-year undergraduate students. The BCC has relished a positive relationship within general education requirements at two- and four-year college institutions in the U.S.

(Engleberg et al., 2008), largely due to extensive assessment efforts that provide evidence for the overall value of communication education and skills training to today's students (e.g., Morreale et al., 2016). In particular, shifting institutional requirements for general education have created an increased need for justification of the BCC as an integral component of most general education systems (Valenzano et al., 2014), prompting researchers to expend effort toward better understanding individual student needs and experiences within this context (see Hess, 2016).

In particular, students report that their instructor impacts their levels of motivation in a course (Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Gorham & Christophel, 1992), with a particular emphasis on demotivation. Specifically, they are “more likely to attribute their lack of motivation in a college class to what the teacher does and to attribute their being motivated to more personal factors” (Gorham & Christophel, 1992, p. 249). Thus, revisiting these findings builds on our knowledge of instructor behaviors that are considered motivating and demotivating for students in general education courses like the BCC (Kaufmann & Tatum, 2017). Moreover, since students may not find inherent value in their general education courses (Thompson et al., 2015), along with the need for communication researchers to highlight the relevance and importance of the BCC (Valenzano, 2018; Valenzano et al., 2014), evaluating the factors that influence students' motivation, specifically within the BCC, becomes a pivotal area for study. An increased understanding of how we can foster students' investment and engagement in the BCC has the potential to provide additional support for the BCC as a linchpin in the general education system and discipline as a whole (Dance, 2002). To this end, Glynn et al. (2005) synthesized several existing theories of human motivation to provide strategic guidance for educators interacting with students through their general education courses, noting that:

Self-determination in general education programs can be supported by providing students with appropriate challenges and feedback, by giving them leadership opportunities, by fostering their relationships with peers and their parents, by creating positive learning environments, and by providing them with a role in college governance. (p. 157)

In an effort to build on Glynn et al.'s (2005) observations and further investigate student motivation within the specific context of the BCC, the purpose of the

current study was to qualitatively explore instructor behaviors and student motivation within this context, specifically through the lens of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

### Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) maintains that motivation is a multidimensional construct, existing along a continuum from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic, or controlled motivation, is derived from external pressures or tangible outcomes. Conversely, intrinsic, or autonomous motivation, is derived from an individual's own choice based on their enjoyment, interest, or fulfillment (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008). According to SDT, students' growth can be fostered or impeded by social-contextual factors, including the educational environment and instructor behaviors. Specifically, when students' basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are realized, they are more likely to engage in the learning process based on feelings of personal fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). *Autonomy* encompasses students' perceptions of being the source of their own behavior and a need to see their actions as an expression of their true selves (Ryan & Deci, 2000). *Competence* encompasses feelings of effectiveness within social interactions, as well as the need for opportunities to demonstrate capabilities to full capacity. *Relatedness* encompasses feelings of connection and belongingness, as well perceptions of caring and being cared for by others (Ryan & Deci, 2002). One way that instructors can help fulfill these needs in the classroom, and thus encourage students' intrinsic motivation, is to engage in autonomy-supportive instruction.

Autonomy-supportive instruction can take many forms (see Ryan & Deci, 2017 for a review), including offering students choices (Goldman & Brann, 2016; Katz & Assor, 2007), providing meaningful rationales (Baker & Goodboy, 2019; Reeve et al., 2002), and adapting to student preferences (Jang et al., 2016). Autonomy-supportive instruction has been positively associated with desirable outcomes, such as students' concentration (Reeve et al., 2004), behavioral engagement (Assor et al., 2002; Hornstra et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2016; Jang et al., 2010), academic performance (Black & Deci, 2000; Sheldon & Krieger, 2007), and persistence (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013).

More specifically, students' psychological needs have been found to mediate the relationships between instructors' teaching behaviors and student outcomes. For example, Baker and Goodboy (2019) found that autonomy-supportive instructor

behaviors (i.e., offering choices and providing rationales) increased students' intrinsic motivation, which in turn resulted in higher levels of sustained attention, likelihood of participation, and decreased likelihood of spreading negative word-of-mouth messages about the instructor. Other scholars have found psychological needs to mediate the association between instructor behaviors and increases in students' intrinsic motivation (Goldman et al., 2017), higher levels of academic self-concept and grades (Gutiérrez et al., 2018), and decreases in likelihood to engage in academic dishonesty (Kanat-Maymon et al., 2015). Given the consistently positive outcomes of autonomy-supportive instruction, instructional communication researchers have begun to examine student motivation within the SDT framework.

Goldman and Brann (2016) examined SDT from a communication perspective and reported that instructors bolstered students' feelings of autonomy by promoting diverse assignment topics, encouraging debates and discussion, eliciting and considering opinions on assessment, and adapting course material to student needs. In order to meet competence needs, students identified instructors' oral and written feedback, challenging assignments and assessments, and public praise as contributors to their need for competence, in addition to their own social comparisons and opportunities to publicly showcase their abilities. Finally, with regard to relatedness needs, students described instructors promoting group work and collaboration, using humor, encouraging out-of-class communication, engaging in verbal immediacy behaviors and self-disclosure, and demonstrating care for students. Indeed, Furlich (2014) found that instructors' verbal immediacy behaviors were positively related to motivation for students at a research university (but not a community college). Additionally, Baker and Goodboy (2018) found that instructor misbehaviors, in the form of boring lectures and antagonistic behavior, were negatively associated with students' psychological needs. Though instructional communication behaviors have been linked with students' needs and motivation, instructional scholars have yet to explicitly examine self-determination within the unique context of required general education courses.

### **Self-Determination in the BCC**

In addition to the clear implications stemming from instructor communication behaviors, student motivation is also influenced by the larger context in which instruction occurs. For many undergraduate students, this is reflected through their experiences in general education. General education curricula reflect a series of required interdisciplinary courses or core areas of study that are required by a large

percentage of collegiate institutions in various forms (Hart Research Associates, 2016). For communication scholars, these concerns often manifest in the BCC (Hess, 2016; Valenzano et al., 2014). Despite the history of the long-standing program of general education, as well as the positive intent on which it is founded, students have reported difficulty finding motivation to succeed in general education classes where they feel the expectations, outcomes, and demands are diminished (Glynn et al., 2005; Jessup-Anger, 2011).

Though autonomy, in particular, has been identified as the true driver of self-determination (Kerssen-Griep, 2001), Goldman and Brann (2016) point out that “complete autonomy within an educational context is nearly impossible, as success in these situations is often predicated on predetermined structure, development, and progression” (p. 12). This may be particularly true in general education courses such as the BCC, as students are not offered a choice with regard to whether or not to take the class; their autonomy is already mitigated because they are taking a course that is required and may not be perceived as directly related to their specific interests or majors. Additionally, individual instructors may be limited in their ability to adapt course material or assignments to their students if they are working within an already structured multi-section course. Within the constraints of this context, then, are students inclined to be more intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, and how do instructors contribute to this motivation? The purpose of the current study was to revisit instructor behaviors and student motivation within this context, guided by the following research question:

RQ1: What instructor behaviors do students identify as motivating them in the BCC?

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

Participants included undergraduate students ( $N = 373$ ) enrolled in a lower-level basic multimodal communication course during the Fall semester at a Midwestern university. The participants consisted of female students ( $n = 254$ ) and male students ( $n = 119$ ), ranging in age from 18 to 26 ( $M = 18.54$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).

Data for the current study were collected as part of basic course assessment. Specifically, as part of assessment, students in the basic course are required to

complete a post-test at the end of the semester (i.e., week 15 and 16). Students were asked to provide their consent in order for their data to be used beyond assessment purposes. Only the responses of consenting students were included in the current study. The post-test included several additional cognitive and affective questions for assessment purposes, which are not reported in this study.

## Measurement

**Student motivation.** As part of larger assessment data in the basic communication course, students were asked to respond to an open-ended question about their experiences with the course instructor and their perceptions of motivation. Specifically, they were asked *“What, if anything, did your instructor do that helped keep you motivated this semester? Please provide examples below.”*

## Data Analysis

In order to answer the proposed research question, the authors developed a codebook using self-determination theory (SDT) as their guide. Specifically, the categories derived by Goldman and Brann’s (2016) qualitative exploration of student motivation and SDT formed the basis of our codebook, with additional themes added to these categories as they emerged from participant responses. Based on the theoretical framework and Goldman and Brann’s (2016) work, 23 themes relevant to categories of relatedness, autonomy, competence, as well as extrinsic/controlled motivation, amotivation, and self-motivation emerged (see Table 1). Of Goldman and Brann’s (2016) original typology, four themes related to students’ autonomy (encouraging debates and discussion) and competence (social comparisons, public praise, publicly showcase ability) did not emerge in participant responses. The authors met, reviewed the themes, and randomly selected approximately 20% of responses ( $n = 79$ ) to code in order to establish intercoder reliability. Based on the initial coding, a Krippendorff’s alpha of .94 was achieved. Thus, the remaining responses ( $n = 294$ ) were divided amongst the three research team members.

## Results

The purpose of the current study was to identify instructor behaviors that students perceived as motivating in their basic communication course. Categories, themes, exemplars, and frequencies for perceived motivators are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
***Motivation themes and frequencies***

Category/Theme	Frequency
Relatedness	185
Positive Teaching Style*	75
Content Relevance*	50
Demonstrating Care	21
Positive Climate*	18
Self-Disclosure	7
Using Humor	6
Promoting Group Work and Collaboration	5
Encouraging Out-of-Class Communication	2
Verbal Immediacy	1
Competence	103
Reducing Uncertainty*	36
General Encouragement*	34
Oral and Written Feedback	21
Challenging Assignments and Assessments	12
Autonomy	69
Adapting Course Material Around Student Needs	28
Promoting Diverse Assignment Topics	20
Time Management*	14
Respecting Students*	5
Eliciting and Considering Opinions on Assessment	2
Self-Motivation*	13
Extrinsic/Controlled Motivation	88
External Motivators*	56
Reminders*	27
Emphasizing Extrinsic Rewards/Punishments*	5
Amotivation*	3

*Note.* \*denotes codes unique to the current study

### **Relatedness with Instructor**

The most frequently recognized category, *relatedness*, generally involved students identifying instructor behaviors that exemplified the instructor's consideration for

relationships, connections, and interactions with the students (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Of the nine themes identified in this category, three were unique to this study (i.e., *positive teaching style*, *content relevance*, and *positive climate*).

The first and most frequently reported theme, *positive teaching style*, described instructors who were enthusiastic, exciting, engaging, and/or interesting with their teaching style. For example, students noted that motivating instructors were “...always enthusiastic which made me happy and motivated me to come to every class,” or described how they “...always brought tons of energy to the class, even when he wasn't feeling well. He constantly made sure to incorporate our ideas into topics for assignments so we would be interested and motivated,” and “... did not harp on certain aspects of the class that would make anything boring or cease my interest in the subjects discussed.”

The second identified theme, *content relevance*, identified instructor behaviors that were tailored to show how the course content and/or assignments were related to the students' academic, career, or personal interests. For example, one student noted that the instructor would “tell us how this class is valuable to our futures.” Other students noted that assignments were tailored for their interests and even major, for example an instructor who “...suggested the importance of being able to publicly speak for those who are journalism majors,” and others who “...always connected it to our major which made everything much more interesting.”

The third theme, *demonstrating care*, referred to instructors who showed a desire to help the students with classroom-related problems and would check in on the students. Students identified this theme by noting, “She always was there when I needed help with an assignment.” Similarly, another student talked about an instructor who “...helped keep us motivated by telling us not to panic and if we had a speech or essay he always worked us through it to make sure we did it correctly.” Other instructors also “...offered to help us with topic ideas, wording, etc.,” and were available throughout the semester: “he was very good with working with us if we had any issues.”

The fourth theme, *positive climate*, illustrated instructor motivating behaviors that focused on building and maintaining an enjoyable climate or learning environment. For example, one student pointed out, “I enjoyed the environment which I think was a big motivator.” Others talked about how an instructor “created a good environment that made freshman year easier.” Other instructors “encouraged a positive learning environment, which in return kept her students motivated,” and

“...made the atmosphere seem more friendly and encouraged us that we can do anything with the right motivation.”

The fifth theme, *self-disclosure*, identified instructor communication behaviors that were focused on telling stories about personal experiences, and in particular, stories about their own college experiences. For example, students who mentioned *self-disclosure* as a motivating behavior described an instructor who “...talked about his own learning experience. He made us aware that he was a student as well as an instructor and this helped me feel as if the workload wasn't as bad.”

The sixth theme, *humor*, specifically pointed out efforts on the part of the instructor to tell jokes, use humorous examples, or incorporate funny stories that would help explain the course content. Students who noted being motivated by instructor *humor* identified behaviors such as “she always was engaging in her topics adding humor to add to the information being given and to grab her students' attention in a way that was fun,” or “he kept it funny and interesting.”

The seventh theme, *promoting group work and collaboration*, described instances when the instructor encouraged students to work with a partner or group to complete activities or assignments. Students noted they were motivated because they “had peer assignments and attempted activities,” or “had interactive activities involving working with our peers, which helped keep me motivated.”

The eighth theme was *encouraging out-of-class communication* (i.e., instructors who invited their students to come talk after class or during office hours). For example, one student described their instructor “meeting with us one on one really helped to keep me motivated and less overwhelmed.”

The ninth and final theme was instructor use of *verbal immediacy*, such as using students' names to call on them in class. For example, one student noted, “He came to class and made sure to greet us by name, and this small gesture really made it seem as if someone cared about how well I was doing.”

## Competence

The second category, *competence*, generally involved students identifying instructor behaviors that were effective and efficient for the learning experience (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Of the seven themes initially identified, three from Goldman and Brann's (2016) original typology were not identified and were thus removed (i.e., *public praise*, *publicly*

*showcase ability*, and *positive social comparison*); additionally, two new themes emerged in this study (i.e., *general encouragement* and *reducing uncertainty*).

The most frequently identified theme for the competence category, *reducing uncertainty*, encompassed instructor efforts to communicate clear expectations for students, such as providing a clear timeline and preview of upcoming coursework, including descriptions and examples of assignments, or outlining overall class expectations. For example, one student noted, “my professor always gave helpful examples, and this made it easier to complete the assignments with more motivation. I felt like once I truly understood the assignment, it was obviously easier for me to complete.” Another student noted, “honestly it was a great course. I loved knowing what I had to do days in advance. I also liked how he checked in 3 days a week.” Other students remarked that the instructor, “...gave us all our assignments up front which helped motivate me and keep me on a schedule” and “...would explain an assignment in detail way before it was due to help reduce stress on us and encourage us to get ahead on assignments.”

*General encouragement*, when the instructor boosted confidence and/or provided encouragement to the students either personally or collectively, was the second most frequently identified theme in this category. Students noted that their instructors, “always gave words of encouragement” and were “...very encouraging about grades and staying motivated which helped us to enjoy the content.”

The third theme, *oral and written feedback*, was concerned with the instructor providing feedback to the students. One student noted the instructor “encouraged me after every assignment we had with positive feedback.” Other students noted receiving “... great feedback” and having instructors who “...kept me motivated by always giving feedback. Some professors never give feedback to their students, but he always did, and it helped me stay motivated.”

The fourth theme, *challenging assignments and assessments*, was comprised of rigorous or difficult assignments or quizzes for conceptual learning. For example, one student explained how their instructor “...would always know when to push us or cut us some slack” while another student described how the “...assignments required critical thinking and creative writing, which kept me on my toes.”

## **Autonomy**

The third category, *autonomy*, generally involved students identifying instructor behaviors that were centered around the students’ own academic needs, interests,

and success (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Of the six themes identified, two themes (i.e., *respecting students* and *time management*) were unique to this study and one theme did not appear (i.e., *encouraging debates and discussions*).

The first and most frequently reported theme was *adapting course material around student needs*. This encompassed instructor efforts to assess, and make necessary adaptations for, student needs and learning styles. One student recognized this behavior as motivating by stating, “he let us turn in work late sometimes, which helped me balance out my coursework in other classes with this one.” Other students commented on an instructor who administered a learning profile assessment to gain better insight into their needs, stating that this test “helped us connect things about us that we never knew to the way we learn which really ended up helping me.”

The second theme, *promoting diverse assignment topics*, involved providing students with multiple topics or options for an assignment to select. Students remarked that this category motivated them because the instructor “gave us free range to relate our assignments to topics that are interesting to us. She never put a strict topic on something, she gave us parameters and allowed us to fill them in with our own ideas and topics.” Other students described being motivated when they were “able to pick topics that were interesting to us” and appreciated being “...assigned projects that allowed us to choose our own topics and interests.”

The third theme, *time management*, focused on how the instructor provided the students with opportunities to manage their own time or use their time independently. For example, students noted a range of examples focused around their instructors either giving time to work in or out of class: “she gave us several out of class workdays so that we could focus on our assignments rather than having to come to class and waste time that we could have been working on our papers or speeches” and “he gave us time to work on our speeches in class, which helped because it forced me to be motivated in that class.”

*Respecting students* emerged as the fourth theme. This particular theme highlighted instructor behaviors that validated students’ autonomy and essentially treated them as adults. For example, one student noted that the instructor, “treated us as an equal instead of little kids.”

Lastly, *eliciting and considering opinions on assessment* was the last theme in this category. This theme focused on asking for students’ opinions on the structure of exams or assignments. A few students said the instructor would ask for “feedback from us on class.”

### Self-Motivation

Although *self-motivation* is categorized as intrinsic motivation, for this study, the focus was on instructor communication behaviors that were identified as motivating. There were several instances where students reported that they kept themselves motivated, failing to attribute their motivation to any instructional behaviors. This was a new theme identified for this study. For example, one student simply remarked, “I kept myself motivated.”

### Extrinsic/Controlled Motivation

Of the three themes identified in this category, one was unique to this study (i.e., *reminders*). First, *extrinsic/controlled motivation* refers to external factors (e.g., grades, deadlines, punishments) that students perceived as influencing their behavior. Though grades were often mentioned, several students also commented on instances when instructors would provide food as a motivator, such as one student description of an instructor who “...would reward us with coffee, food and good grades.” Others mentioned the provision of extra credit as a motivator as well, describing one instructor who “...gave bonus points that made my grade an A, therefore, pushing me to maintain that grade.”

Students also identified *reminders* as motivating; specifically, when an instructor would issue announcements reminding students of upcoming deadlines. For example, students described how instructors “reminded us of future assignments,” or were “...always reminding us of due dates or upcoming assignments so that we were able to have plenty of time to get them done and make time for other classes as well.”

The final theme related to controlled motivation was *emphasizing extrinsic rewards/punishments*, wherein an instructor would explicitly emphasize the importance of external motivators such as grades. For example, one student said, “he reminded us of how much the grades matter, and that was really enough for me.” Another student stated that “she reminded us of the importance of getting good grades and finishing strongly.”

### Amotivation

Lastly, there were a few cases where students reported a lack of motivation, or *amotivation*. In these cases, students did not act at all or acted without specific intent. For example, one student said, “writing and speech classes never motivate me.”

## Discussion

Given that basic communication and general education courses are required by most universities and colleges, students may enter these specific courses with lower levels of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Weaver & Cotrell, 1989). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify what specific instructor behaviors students found to be motivating within the BCC, a required course. Based on the findings from our study, students identified numerous instances of extrinsic motivators that instructors used in their courses. It is possible that instructors turn to extrinsic motivators, such as providing food or candy to students, as a last resort effort to keep students focused, motivated, and determined to keep pushing through to the end of the semester. However, in the long term, if we want students to internalize the value of the skills being taught, it is important that we employ instructional behaviors that encourage students to develop intrinsic motivation by meeting their needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy within this context. Thus, based on the intrinsic motivation findings, we offer several practical implications for those instructors who teach required basic communication or general education courses.

### Practical Implications: Motivating Students in the BCC

**Motivating through relatedness.** First, those who want to encourage intrinsic motivation in students by meeting their needs for relatedness should consider emphasizing the *content relevance* in their classes. The relevance of classes that are required for general education purposes, and are not directly tied to their major, may not be immediately clear to students, particularly as they are first entering college. Although it may be ideal for sections of the BCC to be tailored for students in particular majors or fields, such as STEM (Frisby et al., 2019), this requires administrative coordination across campuses that may not always be possible. In any course, however, instructors can easily help students view communication skills in particular, as well as additional skills fostered in the basic course (e.g., problem-solving, collaboration) within the bigger picture of their long-term academic and career goals.

For example, each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) publishes a report of the upcoming year's job outlook by surveying employers. Within each report is a table of skills that are in highest demand when looking at college graduates and job applicants. The *Job Outlook 2019* (NACE, 2018) identified written communication skills as the most-often cited desirable skill, while

verbal communication skills were number seven on the list. Other skills within the top ten involve problem-solving, ability to work in a team, strong work ethic, leadership, and being detail-oriented (NACE, 2018, p. 31). This is a useful resource to incorporate into the BCC; for example, on the first day of the semester in the BCC, the first author puts up a slide with this table, and then visually maps all of the assignments for the semester onto it, demonstrating the larger purpose and contributions of the work students will be doing that semester and the role that the BCC plays in their long-term goals. This is one example of how BCC instructors can clearly and explicitly help first-year students make the connections between the course and their academic and career interests.

Additionally, student responses demonstrated appreciation for the incorporation of examples, activities, and course assignments that were related to their academic or personal interests. For example, encouraging students to choose topics for speeches or written assignments that are directly relevant to their majors is one way to help them forge connections between their chosen academic path and a general education course that has been chosen for them. Activities and assignments that demonstrate how communication skills may be applicable outside of the academic or professional context can be fun for students as well, such as having them write and deliver a wedding toast or accept a fake award that they make up for themselves.

In addition to an emphasis on the relevance of the BCC, the use of a *positive teaching style* and establishment of a *positive climate* are additional ways to meet students' needs for relatedness and encourage intrinsic motivation. More specifically, instructors in the BCC need to be cognizant of their role in setting the tone for a course where students may be entering with high levels of apprehension and low levels of enthusiasm and interest (e.g., see Broeckelman-Post & MacArthur, 2017). Based on student responses, instructors who demonstrate enthusiasm for the course content appear to help sway students' negative attitudes toward engagement in the course. This is consistent with the large body of instructional communication literature extolling the benefits of relational instructional behaviors and characteristics. For example, instructor enthusiasm has been positively linked with higher teaching evaluations and student performance, as well as positive attitudes towards teachers and improved classroom behavior (Natof & Romanczyk, 2009; Patrick et al., 2000). Zhang (2014) discovered teacher enthusiasm to positively predict students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, as well as their intrinsic goal orientation and academic self-efficacy. "Clearly, teacher enthusiasm functions as a spark to ignite the flame of curiosity of students and jump-start their

intrinsic motivation to learn” (Zhang, 2014, p. 44). Results of the present study align with this body of literature and demonstrate the student-perceived benefits of these behaviors for their own motivation within a class that, if given the option, they would not necessarily choose for themselves.

Practically, enthusiasm can be demonstrated largely through nonverbal communication, such as uplifting vocal delivery, shining eyes, frequent demonstrative gestures, large body movements, vibrant facial expressions, varied word selection, animated acceptance of ideas and feelings, and exuberant overall energy (Collins, 1978), behaviors highly reminiscent of nonverbal immediacy and approachability (Andersen, 1979). Building and maintaining these perceptions of interest, engagement, and enjoyment in order to create the overall sense of a positive atmosphere and experience has a myriad of positive outcomes for students (e.g., connectedness; Dwyer et al., 2004), and can be an important means of changing student attitudes not only toward the BCC, but towards communication behaviors such as public speaking.

Consistent with the both traditional and online classroom climate literature (e.g., Dwyer et al., 2004; Kaufmann et al., 2016), instructors who want to establish a positive learning environment need to not only consider their communication behaviors with the students, but also how the students’ communication behaviors may influence overall perceptions and interactions of the course. This can be achieved on the first day of classes. For example, the second author discusses the learning goals and assignments with students and initiates conversations about possibly experiencing communication apprehension in the course (see Munz & Colvin, 2018). Next, students are prompted to think about what type of learning environment would make them feel most comfortable and encouraged with regard to working towards the course goals. This prompt typically leads to a discussion around positive interactions, encouragement, and a sense of connection with the instructor and students. Lastly, the second author also makes a point to discuss the importance of being in class not only to learn the content, but to help foster positive learning experiences and environment as well. Similarly, Broeckelman-Post and MacArthur (2017) found that, when BCC instructors required students to attend class, they were able to foster deeper student-student interactions and sense of connectedness.

**Motivating through competence.** Next, for those instructors who want to motivate students by addressing their needs for competence, helping students *reduce uncertainty* can be a helpful way to enhance student perceptions regarding their

abilities to perform the skills and complete the assignments required in the BCC. Particularly given that first-year students make up the majority of the BCC classrooms, the importance of reducing uncertainty for individuals who are adjusting to so much newness in their lives is especially important for helping them avoid feelings of being overwhelmed and subsequently disengaging. One example of how instructors can help mitigate uncertainty includes compiling samples of student work in order to share them as exemplars. Students who may never have written a formal speech outline or cited sources using APA formatting requirements, for example, can benefit from seeing what a finished product might look like. Instructors may take this further by having students grade these sample assignments using the required rubric. This exercise can help students reduce uncertainty in two ways. First, it ensures that they are actually reading through the grading rubric and thinking about what the criteria mean and/or look like in practice. Second, through discussion with peers and the instructor, students learn how others' expectations and standards might differ from their own. Ultimately, at the end of the discussion, the instructor should reveal and explain how they would assess the sample assignment, providing students with more insight into how they should approach their own work, and what they can expect in terms of assessment with that particular instructor.

Relatedly, students in the current study appreciated the provision of detailed assignment descriptions, grading rubrics, and deadlines early on in the semester, in order to help them avoid the uncertainty of what is coming or what is expected. With the widespread incorporation of learning management systems, it has become much easier to provide students with detailed course information from the very beginning of the semester by including all of it within one ever-accessible location. The more instructors clearly communicate and organize their course to reduce students' uncertainty, the more able students may feel to succeed; as feelings of competence increase, so to does their perceived motivation.

Regardless of whether expectations and assignments are made clear to students, there may always be a point (or multiple points) in the semester when students experience threats to their competence or feelings of diminished self-efficacy. Thus, in addition to reducing students' uncertainty, it is important to note the benefits of providing *general encouragement* to boost students' confidence and self-efficacy within the context of the BCC, particularly given the focus on public speaking, which can prompt high levels of anxiety and low levels of self-efficacy in students (e.g., Dwyer & Fus, 1999). Instructors' messages of encouragement or regular "pep talks" seemed

to be particularly memorable and meaningful to students in the present study, contributing to their motivation.

**Motivating through autonomy.** Lastly, instructors who want to motivate students using autonomy should consider meeting unique student needs, for example, by *adapting course materials*, *promoting diverse assignment topics*, and aiding students' *time management* in order to help motivate their students. Students often enter the BCC in their first semester or year of college, and they may struggle with the way information is presented and/or with the course and assignment expectations, both in terms of logistics (e.g., formatting, submitting through a learning management system) and rigor (e.g., high expectations). Getting a sense of students' baseline experiences and abilities, as well as checking in with them to see where they are and how they are handling coursework throughout the semester can give the instructor opportunities to adapt the course to their students. This can be used as a teaching opportunity as well, demonstrating one way that audience analysis and adaptation can be employed. Building a day or two into the course schedule to focus on a subject or skills practice of students' choosing is another way to ensure that we are meeting student needs, as well as giving them some limited control over what they are learning. For example, if the majority of the class feels the need for an extra day to practice impromptu speaking, this allows the instructor to meet that need.

Relatedly, providing opportunities for students to make choices within the BCC can be an effective way to provide them some autonomy within the context of a class that they did not have the autonomy to avoid. One way to implement this suggestion is for instructors to give students options in terms of the type of assignment they would like to complete. Williams and Punyanunt-Carter (2006) did just this, arguing that "the choice between two options allows students to formulate a decision-making criteria and determine which assignment would be more relevant to their needs, goals, and strengths and ultimately increase their own satisfaction with the exercise" (p. 104). Alternatively, as was the case in the BCC from which current participants were recruited, students can be provided with assignment parameters (i.e., for an informative or persuasive speech) but given autonomy with regard to the topic they focus on.

Finally, worth noting in a course with an above average population of first-year students who may be struggling to find balance between their newfound freedom and increased responsibilities and learn effective time management, students were highly appreciative of both in-class and out-of-class work days, which were built into

the course schedule for students to use for major projects. The flexibility afforded by these work days helped enhance students' feelings of autonomy and motivate them to work on their assignments.

### **Self-Determination Theory in the BCC**

In addition to the practical implications gleaned from student responses, results of the current study provide support for SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000) as a viable framework for understanding what motivates students in the BCC. In recent years, SDT has been increasingly applied within instructional communication research (e.g., Baker & Goodboy, 2018; Goldman & Brann, 2016; Goldman et al., 2017), adding a more nuanced understanding of student motivation in the classroom. The current study builds on and contributes to this growing body of research by examining subtle differences in motivation within the unique and targeted context of the required BCC. Specifically, our findings reveal some differences between what motivates students in this imposed educational classroom versus how students view motivation in courses that they take for their major or for voluntarily-chosen electives. These differences are highlighted, for example, when comparing our findings with those of Goldman and Brann (2016), specifically with the emergence of new themes and different frequencies, indicating potentially different priorities for students (and instructors) within these classrooms.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The current study is not without limitations. First, the data were cross-sectional. Future research should collect data at multiple points in the semester to explore how motivation changes, if at all, based on instructor behaviors. Second, students provided their perspectives through open-ended responses, which may not account for all possible instructor behaviors experienced. Interviewing students to allow for follow-up questions and probing of students' examples could provide more insight into what motivates them in these required courses.

### **Conclusion**

Given that the basic communication course serves as the 'front porch' for our discipline (Beebe, 2013), it is important to maintain positive perceptions of the course and content (Valenzano et al., 2014). As Titsworth (2000) noted, "the basic course is uniquely susceptible to both positive and negative motivational outcomes because of the performance nature of the class" (p. 4). Further, given that students

may view the BCC as “generally uninteresting and unbeneficial” (Weaver & Cottrell, 1989, p. 185), finding ways to engage and motivate students within this context can be somewhat challenging at times. The current investigation offers some insight into ways that instructors can meet students’ psychological needs within the context of a required, general education course, in order to maximize the likelihood of fostering students’ intrinsic motivation to learn and perform in the basic communication course.

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