Exemplary teachers generally have one thing in common: their classes bustle with activity as students connect and interact with one another. As teachers who love what we do, we want students to share our excitement and to become fully engaged members of our class community. We know how connections among students can sustain motivation and deepen understanding of course material. But we also know how full life can be for students and how stretched their time is as they juggle family, work, and study commitments. Looking through the eyes of adult learners, we can see that carving out time to collaborate with classmates in an online course may not stand out as a priority. How, then, can we begin to foster the kind of collaboration that our students need in order to fully engage in online courses?
Albert Mehrabian’s explanation of the construct of immediacy, together with theories of how groups work, offers important directions. This chapter explains instructional immediacy, provides a primer on how groups work, and suggests ways to invite students to collaborate in groups by modelling their achievements. Instructional immediacy is at the heart of collaborating and learning in groups. Teachers must demonstrate what intentional commitment to collaboration actually looks like before they can expect students to interact in meaningful ways with their classmates.

BACKGROUND THEORY

An Explanation of Instructional Immediacy

Understanding the construct of instructional immediacy is foundational to effectively fostering collaboration among students. Encouraging learners to engage in collaborative activities with one another begins with communicating our own availability, friendliness, and willingness to connect in personal ways with our students. As technology offers increasing possibilities for electronic communication, teachers must not lose sight of the basic feelings and responses that we know exist within the teacher-student relationship. Teachers who demonstrate immediacy in their classrooms, whether face to face or online, engage students and invite them to risk looking at the world in new ways.

The construct of immediacy was introduced in the 1960s by social psychologist Albert Mehrabian, who defined immediacy as an affective expression of emotional attachment, feelings of liking and being close to another person (Mehrabian, 1967, 1971; Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). Immediacy, in other words, is a sense of psychological closeness.
In the context of face-to-face university classrooms, the definition of instructional immediacy was further developed to include nonverbal manifestations of high affect such as maintaining eye contact, leaning closer, touching, smiling, maintaining a relaxed body posture, and attending to voice inflection (Andersen, 1979). Verbal expressions of immediacy include using personal examples, engaging in humour, asking questions, initiating conversations, addressing students by name, praising students’ work, and encouraging students to express their opinions (Gorham, 1988). Links among teacher immediacy, student motivation, and affective learning have consistently been documented (Baker, 2010; Christophel, 1990; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Gitin, Niemi, & Levin, 2012; Witt, Wheeless, & Allen, 2004).

However, in electronic learning spaces, where nonverbal cues may be less clear or even nonexistent, establishing instructional immediacy, or psychological closeness, can be challenging, but it is not impossible: research has demonstrated links in online learning environments between instructors’ immediacy behaviours, on the one hand, and student satisfaction and instructional effectiveness, on the other (Arbaugh, 2001; Hutchins, 2003; Walkem, in press; Woods & Baker, 2004). The experience of liking and feeling close to instructors can lead to positive effects in online classrooms (Hess & Smythe, 2001), and correlations between immediacy and affective learning have been identified (Baker, 2004; Russo & Benson, 2005).

In essence, instructional immediacy online refers to the extent to which teachers are able to project an affect of warmth and likeability in their communication with students (Melrose, 2009). In online learning environments, one-way immediacy can be demonstrated through word choice. For example, online teachers who refer in their messaging to “our” class and indicate a willingness to work “with” learners through their word choices signal qualities that may prompt immediacy. Words that communicate a genuine interest in getting to know each class member as a unique individual can create a feeling of
safety. This equips instructors with the foundation needed to encourage learners to extend that teacher-student immediacy toward collaboration in the class group.

Research with online health care graduate students that explored their perceptions of instructional immediacy showed that learners value instructional behaviours that model engaging and personal ways of connecting, that maintain collegial relationships, and that honour individual learning accomplishments (Melrose & Bergeron, 2006). Examples include instructors posting self-introductions that include pictures and appropriate personal and professional information, creating a course document incorporating biographical information for each member of the class, and choosing words with gentle connotations (Melrose & Bergeron, 2006). By projecting an affect of warmth and immediacy in our own communication, we can begin the process of creating an engaged and appealing online learning environment where learners feel recognized as individuals and experience a sense of belonging to a vibrant class group.

A Primer on Groups and How They Work

In addition to intentionally projecting an affect high in warmth to strengthen individual relationships with learners, instructional behaviours that communicate immediacy also set the stage for nurturing student-to-student relationships within the learning community. Here, an appreciation of how well-functioning groups work is important. Individuals who join together in a group for a specific purpose such as engaging in a learning activity can be expected to progress through predictable stages. Social psychologists Bruce Tuckman, David Johnson, and Frank Johnson provided seminal frameworks. Tuckman (1965) and Tuckman and Jensen (1977) assert that functional groups move through five stages: forming (characterized by anxiety and uncertainty about belonging), storming (characterized
by competition, individuality, and conflict, norming (characterized by attempts to resolve earlier conflicts and clear expectations of behaviours and roles), performing (characterized by cooperation and productive work), and adjourning (characterized by termination and disengagement from the group). Johnson and Johnson (1997, 2009) identify seven stages through which functional groups progress: defining and structuring procedures and becoming oriented, conforming to procedures and getting acquainted, recognizing mutual trust and building a sense of community, rebelling and differentiating, committing to and taking ownership of the goals of other members, functioning maturely and productively, and finally, terminating.

In online classroom environments, functioning groups are expected to progress through similar stages (Jaques & Salmon, 2007). Gilly Salmon (2000) identifies five stages of online group development: access and motivation (characterized by welcoming and encouraging), online socialization (characterized by familiarizing and providing bridges between cultural, social, and learning environments), information exchange (characterized by facilitating tasks and supporting use of learning materials), knowledge construction (characterized by facilitating process), and development (characterized by supporting and responding). In addition, Salmon emphasizes that the ability to guide online groups is more important than making polished instructional presentations.

Melrose and Bergeron (2007) link the three overarching stages of group development, beginning/engagement, middle/encouragement, and ending/closure, and suggest specific online instructional approaches to facilitate progress at each stage. For example, in the beginning/engagement stage, learners value knowing that their instructors are available “if you need me” and that it is safe to contact them. In the middle/encouragement stage, learners appreciate personal help with networking and managing conflict, particularly in relation to participation and marking. In this middle stage, students also value individual private feedback from instructors. And,
in the ending/closing stage, learners need opportunities to debrief and reflect.

Implementing teaching actions at the most opportune time, such as intervening promptly when the expected conflict emerges once a group has entered its working phase, offers important reassurance to students. In contrast, implementing a teaching action at an inopportune time can have the opposite effect. For example, during the beginning phase of group work, introducing activities that encourage over-long reflection (which leads to inaction) can inadvertently communicate teacher abandonment. Knowing that learners value debriefing time in the ending stage of their group work leads educators to consider ways to ensure that this time is available. Furthermore, introducing supplementary content or tasks not required for course credit is more meaningful in the beginning rather than the middle or ending stages of a class group’s developmental trajectory.

No primer on groups and how they work would be complete without considering the seemingly obvious point that a group is a collection of individuals. Group members each bring their own distinct needs to any collaboration in which they participate. In efforts to support interaction and collaboration among students, educators must bear in mind that each student is an individual learner as well as a member of a learning group.

**Individual Support of Learners in Groups**

Learning groups differ substantively from other groups in that the designated formal leader, the teacher, ultimately determines learners’ grades. Given the critical importance of grades in higher education, working collaboratively and sharing the same grade can be perceived as threatening. During course activities when students work in groups, learners need continued assurance that the teacher will remain present and attentive to their needs as individuals.
If we empathize with students, we can easily appreciate how the threat of achieving poor grades or even failing might have a dramatic effect on their willingness to collaborate with fellow students in group projects. Abraham Maslow’s (1982) well-known “hierarchy of needs” indicates that an individual’s survival needs (physiological needs for air, water, and food, and safety needs for security and protection) must be fulfilled before the psychological needs for esteem, belonging, and self-actualization can be met. In the high stakes environment of higher education, learners need passing grades in order to survive. Given that students need to feel safe individually before they can be expected to engage in social activities such as belonging to a group, maintaining one-to-one communication with students takes on new significance. Simply sending regular private emails to each student, addressing students by name in written communication, and offering timely evaluative feedback on submissions can unobtrusively communicate the instructor’s presence. This sense of presence provides learners with reassurance and feelings of security that are foundational to full group participation.

Group members have varying needs that their group can help satisfy (Beebe & Masterton, 2011). While some learners may have a high need for safety within a group, others may have a strong need for esteem and respect from the group. When specific individual needs are not met by the group, participants may dominate conversations, withdraw from participating, or introduce distractions. These dysfunctional behaviours slow the group’s progression through the expected stages. Members may feel uncomfortable and dissatisfied with the collaborative process. Negative past experiences with groups can leave students reluctant to risk working together in future projects.

Online educators can play important roles in preventing negative group experiences. For example, intervening promptly and efficiently when the needs of an individual begin to interfere with a group’s functioning is critical (Bergeron & Melrose, 2006). By monitoring collaborative work and requiring groups to attend to their own group
process, teachers can remain well prepared to intervene when necessary. For instance, requiring groups to establish and submit their own “rules of engagement”—ground rules or guidelines—at the first meeting ensures that these will be available when needed. Contingency plans delineating consequences for not attending sessions, not submitting contributions, and not respecting members’ time need to be clearly articulated in these group rules. Some groups may want group members to be graded individually. Others may wish to have input into the grades that their colleagues receive. Opportunities for progressive self-evaluation need to be built into the group’s task timelines. The exercise of creating these rules, consequences, and self-evaluations, coupled with the formal requirement to submit a document that explains the rules, emphasizes the importance of group process in collaboration. In turn, this emphasis on process can communicate further assurance to students that they will be respected for their individual accountability during their involvement with collaborative work.

William Schutz’s (1958) classic theory of interpersonal behaviour postulates that when individuals form and interact in groups, they all have needs for inclusion (feeling recognized and included, and reaching out to make others feel included), control (feeling in control, contesting issues, vying for leadership, and resolving conflicts), and affection (giving and receiving emotional support). Teaching actions that foster a sense of belonging, such as communicating that participation in group work is essential and ensuring that students are competent in the use of required tools such as the Internet and the learning management system, will begin to project a message that inclusion is important. Similarly, instructions phrased in a welcoming manner (“Let’s make sure no one misses the chance to join a group”) will invite students to pay attention to principles of inclusion.

Teaching actions such as allocating marks for participation, requiring group guidelines, and normalizing the experience of conflict as a natural part of a group’s progress will help learners feel that
they can maintain personal control during their experience as group members. The phrasing of instructions is important, as it models an underlying attitude. For example, “Reach out and let me know when things aren’t going well” communicates that a designated formal leader (the teacher) is available and that group members will not be abandoned in managing issues they cannot resolve.

Teaching actions such as providing models of positive feedback during class discussions, writing genuinely encouraging comments on assignments, and affirming learner effort illustrate affection. Instructions such as “Showcase your leadership skills by offering help and encouragement when your group needs it most” communicate that offering emotional support is a valued behaviour in the class.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES CONGRUENT WITH INSTRUCTIONAL IMMEDIACY THEORY

The strategies and interactive activities described below are affiliated with promoting instructional immediacy and can be adapted to a variety of online learning environments.

**Projecting Immediacy**

**INTENTIONAL INTRODUCTIONS**

Facilitating intentional introductions among members of a class is often overlooked as an important teaching activity. Student questions related to course content and the tasks that need to be done can dominate dialogue when students first meet one another in online courses. However, inviting students to thoughtfully introduce themselves has important implications for successful collaboration later. In groups of more than thirty learners, creating small subgroups for this
introductory activity provides the opportunity for more meaningful
in-depth initial sharing. Teachers who model a self-introduction that
provides appropriate personal and professional information—including a photo, if desired—will establish an invitational tone. Such
teacher introductions also role-model the appropriate level of self-
disclosure. Identifying specific elements to include in the introduc-
tion—such as geographic location, employment, particular areas of
interest within the course, time constraints, and hobbies and inter-
est—provides the class with the opportunity to discover commonal-
ities that facilitate connections and future conversations.

Another approach to facilitating introductions is to have students
introduce each other. While this may work most efficiently in syn-
chronous environments, it can be adapted to any learning experience.
In face-to-face groups, dyads for introductions can be assigned by
having students turn to the person sitting next to them. In online learn-
ing environments, dyads can be assigned by the teacher. Imposing a
time limit and providing clear direction will keep the process moving
smoothly. Usually, members of a dyad engage in private chat (either
within the learning platform or using social media) and then intro-
duce their partner to the remainder of the class. Modest learners may
feel more comfortable sharing information with one classmate who
listens attentively and asks probing questions than with introducing
themselves directly to the entire class. Either way, introductions are
the cornerstones for establishing further conversation.

While these further conversations are not generally expected to
continue in the large class, actively suggesting that students connect
with “even just one classmate” in the virtual class “coffee room” or by
e-mail will legitimize the notion that student-to-student interaction is
important to course learning. Links to communication tools such as
Skype or social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and instructions
for using them, can be included in the course syllabus. However, as
Schutz (1958) emphasizes, when people become members of a group,
they have high individual needs to feel included. Therefore, students who experience steep learning curves with technological programs that are new to them may not achieve connection with other learners. Rather, they may be left feeling frustrated, marginalized, and left behind before the formal learning even begins. It is important, therefore, that instructors assess learners to ensure that the learning activities are congruent with students’ needs and abilities.

**PUBLISH A “YEARBOOK”**

After creating a forum within the course management system for students to post introductory messages, the instructor can continue to project immediacy by working with these messages. After teachers model an intentional introduction and invite students to introduce themselves, they compile all the postings and pictures (including their own) into a single document. This “yearbook,” created and posted soon after all introductions have been posted, offers a glimpse into the life of each individual in the class and serves as handy reference as teacher and students get to know one another.

Publishing the yearbook can be as simple as cutting and pasting the postings and pictures into a word processing document and arranging them in alphabetical order. This gesture of working with the introductory information can subtly communicate to students that their teacher is present, attentive, and sincerely interested. Students can edit and add to their yearbook profiles throughout the course. The yearbook is kept within the course management system to protect students’ privacy and maintain confidentiality.

**EMBEDDING AUDIO AND VIDEO MESSAGES**

Podcast messages from teachers can project immediacy. However, imagine the impact of “sharing the stage” by including the voices of
students, present or past, in addition to the teacher’s voice. Students who have already taken the class can compose brief audio and video messages that offer tips on completing course tasks. Melrose (2011) and Melrose and Swettenham (2013) collected audio messages of encouragement from senior students through digitally recorded telephone interviews. The messages were embedded in asynchronous self-directed introductory courses for health care professionals. Messages from past students included suggestions about time management, effective reading of textbooks, and communicating with instructors. As learners worked alone via distance, they were literally able to hear words of encouragement from students who had succeeded in the course.

Similarly, embedding video messages from the instructor or from experts in the area of study enhances immediacy. Students find it enlightening to see and hear descriptions of how course content is used. These videos can be solicited by the instructor and created specifically for the course, or students can seek out and share existing course-related videos. Descriptions of scenes from movies and television shows can be discussed when copyright restrictions prevent the inclusion of a popular film clip.

**From the Field: Voiceover Feedback on Assignments**

Diana Campbell gives voiceover feedback on assignments to provide students with meaningful comments. Providing feedback is essential to establishing positive teacher-student relationships. In online learning environments, particularly those dominated by text-based communication, hearing the voice of the teacher personalizes feedback. Voiceover feedback also offers an opportunity to project a tone of warmth and friendliness.
Diana tried this technique in one course and, based on positive student response, expanded it to other courses. After ensuring that students can open PDFs and have audio on their computers, she inserts a marking guide into the student’s assignment and converts the entire Word document to PDF. Then she inserts the audio icon and records her oral feedback for the student.

From students’ feedback, Diana has determined that this approach provides a greater sense of personal contact between student and instructor. She reports that this method allows her to provide more in-depth feedback in a time-efficient manner, and students have said that they enjoy being able to hear the tone of her comments.

Encouraging Group Collaboration

GROUP GUIDELINES

As discussed above, groups can be expected to progress through predictable stages, and individuals in a group may act in ways that either help or hinder that progression. The stakes are high in health care learning environments, and when students work in groups, their academic survival can be impacted by group dynamics. To support students toward success in any group project, instructors can require the submission of group guidelines or ground rules (written by the group) shortly after the group’s first meeting. In addition, collaboration on grading group work can be encouraged when course syllabi can accommodate this. For example, the group could decide whether the same grade will be assigned to all members of the group and whether peer evaluation will be included.
As part of the process of creating group guidelines, a facilitated class discussion could give the students an opportunity to share positive “dreams” and negative “nightmares” that they have experienced in previous face-to-face or online class groups. Once the small working groups have been formed, members could be encouraged to link dreams to expectations and nightmares to consequences as they develop group guidelines. Since nightmares often occur when group members do not participate, consequences for not attending sessions or not submitting contributions must be clear in the consensus-based guidelines. Some groups may specify that a consequence of limited participation will be to seek help from the instructor, while others may agree that the member will be “fired” and the instructor notified of the group’s decision. However varied group guidelines may be, having them in writing, agreed upon by all group members, and ready to use will help the group progress.

PEER EXEMPLARS

When students enter a learning space and begin to examine course materials, one of the first questions they grapple with is, What do I have to do? More precisely, students often wonder, What does the teacher want? Whether the class learning environment is a brick-and-mortar lecture hall, a multimedia online conference, or a solitary desk with an asynchronous self-directed learning module, students need to know what actions are required of them. One welcome supplement to well-written course study guides and assignment directions is a set of examples of work that other students in the course have done.

Copyright restrictions must be considered here. Some institutions will require stripping all identifying information from student products. Certainly, the students must be consulted and must grant their permission to have their work made available to others, and students posting their own work for others in the course to view can be reminded to remove private information such as student identification
numbers. It is best to make example assignments created by former students available for only a short time and to stipulate that they are for illustrative purposes only and may not be reproduced. Most students find it very complimentary to be asked to share their work as exemplars.

Issues related to plagiarism can emerge when students have access to completed assignments. Posting examples of students’ work is most suited to smaller classes where unique and personal adaptations of assignment guidelines are required. It is not suited to large introductory classes with assignments involving the broad collection of information or to assignments involving the description of a particular clinical condition. In these situations, the potential for plagiarism may outweigh the learning benefits. However, this practice is well suited to an assignment where health care students are asked to link their personal experiences to a specific situation or condition.

**CREATING LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS**

When faced with the task of sorting through new and seemingly overwhelming amounts of information, students can ease their anxiety by connecting with another learner in the same situation. In face-to-face learning experiences, particularly in the early stages of a course, health care students often gather during class coffee breaks and initiate such contacts. Online students lack these opportunities to connect physically, but teachers can create learning milieus that foster a similar connection. For example, learning partners can be assigned by pairing names in the order they appear on the class list or according to where students live. Alternatively, students can be invited to contact a classmate who might share a common interest, and if a learning partnership is formed, the names can be posted promptly for the rest of the class to see. In this way, the same individuals will not repeatedly be asked to partner, and all members of the group will be included. When the class does not have an even number of members, indicating
that one partnership is expected to be a triad will model a commitment to inclusion within the class.

Learning partnerships do not necessarily have to be associated with formal assignments. Students can be invited to work with their partner on optional course activities such as puzzles or discussion questions. Some students may choose not to develop their learning partner relationship further, but encouraging partnerships implicitly communicates a class norm of connection among students. For example, virtual students may be encouraged to connect with classmates in an online forum established to mimic the coffee break experience. Simply setting up a coffee break forum, though, may not be sufficient to cultivate student-to-student connections. Instructors can invite students to connect with another student to clarify a question about expectations for the course. In some instances, such questions will be readily answered when the students collaborate. At other times, students will bring the question forward to the teacher. Either way, the confidence and connection that can accompany discussing a course matter with another individual involved with the same class facilitates the development of learning partnerships.

STUDY GROUPS

Another collaborative practice that teachers have found to be effective is the creation of study groups. This can be implemented by establishing an area within the course management system where students can indicate their interests, communicate their availability, and form groups to work together on their shared goals. Usually, students are not required to join a study group: membership is optional. However, teachers can encourage students to participate by posting scenarios about how this activity might strengthen learning or by inviting students to share anecdotes from previous learning experiences where study groups were helpful (or not helpful).
Although students are expected to organize their own study groups, teachers can offer to help with the process. For example, students can “register” their membership in a group with their teacher and submit reports on the group’s activities. Teachers can also volunteer to attend selected study group sessions and pose questions intended to stimulate thinking and encourage students to reflect on what they are learning.

GROUP ASSIGNMENTS

Group assignments promote student-to-student connection and interaction. Describing group assignments in any course promotional material or institutional calendars cues students even before they join the class that group participation is expected and offers them the opportunity to begin thinking about their contribution.

The most effective group assignments entail incremental submissions. Early deadlines are best for the submission of group-determined participation guidelines (which also outline the consequences of not abiding by the guidelines). It is helpful to establish a private forum for each group where group members can meet to discuss their group processes and assignments. With the students’ awareness, instructors can include themselves as a member of each private group forum.

Staying alert to any signs that a group is not progressing or is having issues that the group members cannot resolve internally allows the instructor to take action promptly. Opportunities for group members to earn credit for addressing group-maintenance functions can be built into the group project. For example, midway through the course, in the group’s private working areas, group members can respond to questions such as, What is going well in your group right now?, What is one action that you have committed to that will improve group process?, or What are some approaches initiated by your fellow group members that have helped maintain group
functionality? Similarly, once the group assignment is completed, group members can be encouraged to complete statements such as “One thing I appreciated about our group was . . .” or “One thing I would do differently next time is . . .” Providing wikis for both group tasks and group-maintenance functions in the private group forums will encourage ongoing dialogue about how the group is doing as well as what they are accomplishing in terms of their group goals.

**Alumni as a Course Resource**

Incorporating resources developed by former students into the course can illustrate the relevance and practical application of course material. Graduates or former students can be invited as guest speakers to present lectures or webinars based on their experiences with using course content in their professional practice. A program such as Adobe Connect can be used to record and archive these guest appearances, making them a permanent part of the course.

Course-related conversations between teachers and former students or practitioners can also be crafted into interactive resources. Posting an email from a graduate commenting on how an issue mentioned in class emerged in practice or linking to a practitioner’s blog reflecting on a course topic injects real-world relevance into the course. When teachers extend this by eliciting comments from the class and organizing them to develop a response from the class as a whole, the conversation can develop in unanticipated and helpful directions. It is important to note that although posting email messages and links to blogs is useful, it is the teaching action of organizing a response from the class group that makes the activity interactive and collaborative. Personally connecting with and then “hearing back from” practitioners in learners’ own field of study through these teacher-facilitated dialogues models professional conversations.
PEER EVALUATION

Peer evaluation activities can direct focus toward collaboration among students. Gathering peer feedback and factoring it into learners’ final grades emphasizes engagement with others as important to success in the course. When an assignment calls for online presentations, it can include a requirement for evaluation questions related to their presentations. Programs like Survey Monkey are readily available to generate evaluation questionnaires that will ensure anonymous responses. However, class feedback about what audience members found most valuable, what they found less valuable, and what they suggest changing next time provides learners with a greater range of responses than just one teacher’s feedback.

CONCLUSION

Teaching approaches that promote instructional immediacy and project a warm and friendly affect can enhance collaboration among learners. Teachers can project immediacy through choosing words that encourage connection and modelling the kind of communication that is expected from the students. This creates an engaging and invitational online learning environment in which learners feel recognized both as individuals and as members of a class group.

Theorists such as Bruce Tuckman, David Johnson, Frank Johnson, and Gilly Salmon offer important insight into the stages through which groups can be expected to progress. Appreciating how well-functioning groups work can guide instructors toward implementing the most effective teaching actions at the most opportune times in the group process. William Schutz’s (1958) seminal work reminds us that when people join groups, they continue to have individual needs to be included, to feel in control, and to be received affectionately by others. When these individual needs interfere with a group’s
progress, teachers must intervene promptly. Maintaining one-to-one communication with students throughout their involvement with group work conveys instructional support and promotes accountability. Requiring groups to establish and then submit their group guidelines, their consequences for lack of adherence to the guidelines, and their plan for continually evaluating their group process and maintenance functions strengthens collaboration.

Teachers can project approachability and friendliness with diverse practices using a variety of technologies. They can encourage collaboration among students by implementing and adapting the ideas provided in this chapter or by creating their own activities designed to promote teamwork. With care and attention to communication among students and between the teacher and students, relationships within the class are bound to flourish as the course progresses, enhancing every aspect of learning.

REFERENCES


Instructional Immediacy


Instructional Immediacy


