

1 Original Research Article

2 **Improving Communication Style Awareness in**

3 **a Teacher Preparation Program**

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8 **ABSTRACT**

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Aims: Teacher communication can positively or negatively influence student performance. The ability to be flexible in style increases successful communication but requires a high degree of self-awareness. The purpose of this initial investigation was two fold. First, to examine potential shifts in student teacher's preferred communication styles dependent upon participation in a Communication Styles Workshop using an existing program (HRDQ). Second, to initiate a dialogue regarding a potential need to infuse Communication Styles awareness into educator preparation program curricula.

Study design: A quasi-experimental design approved by the University of Houston-Victoria Human Subjects Committee was used to determine if participants changed their communication style preference after exploring the benefits of different styles.

Place and Duration of Study: Two sections of a teacher preparation program conducted at two locations near Houston Texas were employed to create the experimental and control groups.

Methodology: Forty-six student teachers (37 female, 3 male, 6 unspecified, ages 20-60) participated in intact groups, one being the experimental and the second the control group. The Communication Styles Assessment (HRDQ) defined participant's communication styles the start (pre-test) and end (post-test) of a semester. The experimental group participated in a series of exercises exploring communication styles while the control group participated in the regular curriculum.

Results: Two-tailed paired sample t-tests ($p < .05$) were employed to examine pre to post-test preference differences for communication style preferences within groups. A significant increase in the preference for the most beneficial style ($t = 2.05$ (df 24) $p = .05$) and a significant decrease in preference for the least efficacious style $t = 2.35$ (df 24) $p = .03$ was seen in the experimental group, but not in the control group.

Conclusion: Higher education educator preparation programs should consider infusion of research-based communication curriculum into coursework that may help encourage a classroom environment supportive of learning and student achievement.

Keywords: communication style, educator preparation, classroom climate, student-teacher relationship, quasi-experiment

3. *Research Papers and Short Notes should follow the structure of Abstract, Introduction, Methodology, Results and Discussion, Conclusion, Acknowledgements, Competing Interests, Authors' Contributions, Consent (where applicable), Ethical approval (where applicable), and References plus figures and/or tables.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher communication in the classroom whether providing instructions, encouragement or conferring with students has the potential to influence student success or failure. [1] It cannot be assumed that teachers intuitively know how to engage in classroom communication that promotes learning and effective classroom management. [1] In fact, teachers may have a preferred communication style that inhibits student classroom success rather than promotes it. Students prefer classroom teacher communication styles that are friendly, relaxed and attentive rather than those that are dominant and contentious.

[2]Generally speaking effective classrooms need a teacher to use a balanced mix of communication styles to match students' needs for considerate or friendly communication.

Personality styles influencing communication can be identified and described as direct, spirited, considerate or systematic using a simple instrument titled "What's My Communication Style" (HRDQ Style Series, 2008).[3]This instrument is based on the personality theories of Marston and Jung, using a model identifying two basic dimensions of personal style: Assertiveness and Expressiveness. Assertiveness is the effort a person makes to influence or control the thoughts or actions of others. Expressiveness is the effort that a person makes to control his or her emotions and feelings when relating to others. Combining the two dimensions results in a four-quadrant model with four unique personal styles: Direct, Spirited, Considerate, and Systematic. The simplicity of the HRDQ allows trainers ease in facilitation and makes it memorable and easy for participants to apply."[3] The HRDQ is a commercial program and has been developed for use in setting such as business.

Effectiveteacher-student communication is an essential building block of a positive learning community used to promote student achievement highlighted in The Framework for 21st Century Learning (2010).[4] The teacher's role in supporting student learning and academic achievement is vital. Lack of teacher insight into their own communication style(s) has the potential to negatively impact broader classroom academic and social relationships resulting in a poor learning environment even when teachers understand and effectively embed instructional pedagogy into their classroom. Effective use of communication of praise has been shown to increase positive classroom interactions. [5]

Since a lack of critical communication skills may impede student learning [6] and effective communication is critical for adequate teaching performance [7] it is essential for teachers to understand the art of classroom communication. Classroom teachers may strive to be understood by their students but fall short of that goal due to inadequate communication skill awareness. [8] Building student teacher awareness of communication styles has the potential to improve the subsequent interpersonal relationships they will form with their own students. [9, 10, 11, 12] Unfortunately educator preparation programs may fail to prepare student teachers in the art of effective classroom communication styles.

Communication styles and the learning environment

Communication styles are an integral part of communication delivery, yet many teachers are unaware of their own communication styles much less the impact it has on the teacher-student learning relationship. A listener may perceive a person's communication style as consistent or inconsistent with the response needed or expected. Communication styles that are abrasive and coupled with poor communication skills fail to create an inviting atmosphere or an optimal environment for learning. Details for four communication styles examined in this study are described later.

Teachers may establish effective communication within the school setting with students, co-workers and administrators, by understanding their own communication styles. Teachers who are well prepared in the art of classroom communication skills and have an awareness of their own communication style can make communication adjustments so the resulting process is a positive rather than a negative one. Gately&Gately (2001) [13] propose that effective interpersonal communication is essential for teachers involved in co-teaching relationships. A clash of communication styles may lead to a lack of openness between colleagues resulting in teacher dissatisfaction.

Studies support that students can identified communication forms that improve classroom climates, including teacher positive affect, support of student's freedom to be independent and convey an acceptance of student's judgment [11]. Students also perceive a positive teacher-student relationship to include communication behavior or styles that shows concern for students esteem needs [12]. Conversely, research has also shown that teachers who use less efficacious styles, such as direct methods of communication create an uninviting learning atmosphere in a classroom setting. Teachers who take the time to learn effective communication skills and integrate them in the classroom improve their interpersonal relationships with students and as a result increased student success [12].

Understanding one's personal communication style has the potential to encourage a positive classroom environment [10] while poor communication skills along with a low level of communication styles awareness may work against a teacher's desire to create a successful learning environment for students. All teachers, whether new to the field or seasoned educators would benefit from gaining skills and awareness in the area of communication [4].

Overview of communication styles

The concept of communication styles evolved from the work of Carl Jung and Myer Briggs. Myer Briggs developed Jung's theories into a frequently used communication style assessment [14]. Research has shown that people have a natural communication style [15] and their conscious and unconscious decisions about communicating are determined by their communication style HRDQ) [3]. Good communication styles require a high

level of self-awareness and individuals who understand their style create positive relationships [9,16,17]. A person who understands his or her own personal style of communicating may enhance good and lasting interpersonal relationships [17]. Personal communication styles will also determine if there will be a clash between two communicators or if there will be cooperation [16]. Generally, personality type will influence communication style as well as other aspects of that person's life such as what motivates them, how interpersonal relationships are managed, and how they focus on their self or others. [9] Generally communication styles are placed into three or four categories with each style having several strengths and weaknesses [18]. One goal in understanding one's own communication style is to use the preferred style to enhance the communication process rather than defeat it. The Communication Style categories measured in this investigation were direct, spirited, systematic and considerate (HRDQ) [3].

Each communication style category has its' strengths and weaknesses. Direct communicators tend to be assertive, decisive decision makers, get quickly to the point, impatient, opinionated, blunt, brusque, task oriented and stubborn. Spirited communicators tend to be artistic, creative, enthusiastic, quick decision makers, have unrealistic goals, make generalizations, and exaggerate. Spirited communicators are willing to help, ask questions, avoid conflict, dislike taking risk, and are good listeners. Considerate communicators promote personal growth of others, have a vested interest in cooperation and respect the views of others. Systematic communicators are slow decision makers, cautious, conservative, detail oriented, good planners and organizers, and follow directions. A person may find him or herself more dominant in one area than another or be dominant in two areas. Persons who are aware of their own communication style can learn to be flexible in their style and increase the potential for developing rapport in different settings [19].

There are many ways to assess communication styles and the categories may be named differently, however, the general definition for each style tends to be primarily the same. Because each communication style has a range of behaviors that may help or hinder the communication process student teachers can be empowered by understanding their preferred communication style. Employing this understanding may make their transition into the teaching field less stressful and more satisfying.

The purpose of this initial investigation was two fold. First, to examine potential shifts in student teachers' preferred communication styles dependent upon participation in a communication styles workshop using the HRDQ. Second, to initiate a dialogue regarding a potential need to infuse communication styles awareness into educator preparation program curricula.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS / EXPERIMENTAL DETAILS / METHODOLOGY

A quasi-experimental untreated control group design with pre and posttest design was used to investigate the use of a communication styles assessment and training program (HRDQ)[3], described later, and student teacher use of communication skills at two teaching locations of a Southeast university.

Experimental Group	O	X	O ₂
Control Group	O		O ₂

The investigation was performed under approval of the University of Houston-Victoria Human Subjects Committee.

Twenty-five student teachers at teaching location one were assigned to the control group while 21 student teachers at location two were assigned to the experimental group. Separate locations were chosen for the two groups to minimize the diffusion or imitation of treatment threat and compensatory rivalry threats to internal validity [20].

Communication styles were determined using a pencil and paper instrument included in the What's My Communicator Facilitator Starter Kit (HRDQ) [3] during the first Professional Seminar meeting for both the control and experimental groups (pre-test). All participants were informed that the instrument would determine their personal communication style and that the results of the assessment would be shared with them during the last class session of their Professional Seminar. The HRDQ was developed employing 210 participants chosen by random selection and utilizing factor analysis to define four communication categories. The sample size yielded a 98% confidence interval that the instrument is representative of the general population. On-going analysis (n=3,628) of the HRDQ assumes a normal distribution according to the developers.[3]

As a result of the pre-assessment students were classified according to their Communication Styles Dimension preference: Considerate (CoC), Systematic (CoSY), Direct (CoD), and Spirited (CoSp). The student teachers in the

experimental group then participated in a four-hour Communication Styles Workshop one month later which is described in detail below. The control group did not participate in the intervention (independent variable).

The first part of the Communication Styles Workshop consisted of a presenting a power-point presentation on "What's My Communication Style" included in the HRDQ What's My Communication Style Facilitators Guide [3]. For the second part, that immediately followed, the experimental students were randomly divided into two groups to participate in identical exercises included in the HRDQ activities packet. Activities were designed to create awareness of communication styles including how styles affects communication, how to assess another's styles quickly and how to "flex" one's own style to effectively communicate with others. Two researchers acted as group facilitators.

For subsequent activities experimental participants were again subdivided into small subgroups of five participants to engage in two communication style activity games. The Style Play Group Card Games included in the HRDQ were used for student teachers to develop an awareness of their own communication style (HRDQ) [3]. The Style Play group card games consist of several different games employing two different sets of cards that are described later.

By playing the games participants were provided with a simple and fun way to gain a better understanding of personality (communication) styles in general, as well as increase awareness of their own and others preferred communication style. Through an increased self-awareness of their individual communication style, as well as those of others, participants were able to develop ideas to enhance communication with others exhibiting differing communication style preferences.

The first game was titled Team Rummy. The key learning objectives of this activity was participant discovery of their predominant communications style, realization that their style is potentially different from others, and lastly, that it may impact the success of communication. This knowledge is applicable to classrooms because every classroom is composed multiple individuals exhibiting various communication styles. Because of this unique mixture of styles each classroom becomes its own entity that has its own unique global communication style. Experimental participants acted as surrogate classrooms in this activity.

Each subgroup, acting as our surrogate classroom, was stationed at their own table with a deck of cards that were face down. Each card contained a single adjective describing a human characteristic typically demonstrated in various daily interactions. For example some descriptive adjectives included candid, accommodating, challenging, orderly, meticulous and consistent. These characteristics describe part of a person's personality related to their communication style.

A designated dealer was instructed to deal five cards to each participant. The remaining cards were placed back on the deck face down. Turning over the top card of deck created a discard stack. After each participant reviewed their cards they reflected on the following two questions. "In general, does the word on the card accurately describe me?" and, "To what extent do I demonstrate this characteristic in my daily interactions?" At this point, each participant was required to draw one card from either the face down deck or the face up stack to replace a card they were required to discard from their "hand." The goal was to create a "hand" that best described themselves. This process was continued until all the cards in the deck were turned face up. For example a participant with a direct communication style might create a hand with cards that contains the adjectives analytical, candid, results oriented, and technical, whereas a participant with a considerate communication style might create a hand that contains cards with the adjectives cooperative, supportive, diplomatic, and self-reliant.

When the game was finished participants place their cards on the table face up. This enabled all participants the ability to see each individual's self-description of their communication style and thus allowed all to observe similarities and difference between members. They could also observe which communication styles were most common.

A second learning game activity, "Name that Style," allowed participants to become acquainted with some basics related to communication style. The overarching goal of this discovery activity was for participants to develop a better understanding of their own communication style and recognize that working with people possessing different communication styles may hinder their ability to communicate effectively unless this knowledge is used to alter their own style to fit with others.

Participants continued to work in their small groups of five around a designated table divided into four areas with each area labeled with a communication style, direct, spirited, considerate, or systematic. A deck of game cards was shuffled and placed face up at the center of the table. Each card in the deck contained a communication scenario.

As participants pulled the top card with a scenario from the deck they placed it in the appropriate style category area on the tabletop. Once all cards were categorized participants were asked to stand by the quarter of the table with the style that best described them.

The activity facilitator encouraged participant discussion of the scenarios on the cards, why a scenario fit into a specific communication style category, and finally, why participants considered themselves to have a particular communication

style. An understanding of miscommunication and how it may develop from differences in communication styles was realized during the discussion.

During the final Professional Seminar of the course both the control and experimental group were again administered the Communication Styles Assessment (HRDQ) [3] (post-test) in an instrument that also included demographic variables and information regarding the participant's certification.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eighty-one percent self-classified as female, 6% as male, and 13% did not specify. Sixty-seven percent were between the ages of 20 – 29, 24% 30 – 39, 4% 40-49 and 4% older than 50 years of age. Thirty-two were seeking early childhood through 6th grade certification, eight were seeking 4th through 8th grade certification, six were seeking 8th through 12th grade certification and seven did not identify. Two-tailed paired sample t-tests with a significance level of P= .05 or less were employed to examine the difference pre to post communication styles assessment for the preference variables considerate (CoC), direct (CoD), spirited (CoSp) and systematic (CoSy) with-in the experimental and control groups. Group means were substituted for missing values. Paired sample correlations were also calculated. Means and standard deviations for communication preferences are noted in table 1.

Table 1 Communication dimension preferences for the experimental group and control groups

Communication Preference	Pre-test Experimental/Control Mean (standard deviation)	Post-testExperimental/Control Mean (standard deviation)
CONSIDERATE (COC)	7.92 (SD 3.01) /7.05 (SD 2.33)	9.00 (SD 2.83)/ 7.38 (SD 2.25)*
DIRECT (COD)	4.12 (SD 1.96)/ 4.67 (SD 2.10)	3.20 (SD 2.14)/ 4.57 (SD 2.42)**
SYSTEMATIC (COSY)	6.16 (SD 2.61)/ 5.95 (SD 2.60)	6.24 (SD 3.00)/ 5.43 (SD 2.69)
SPIRITED (COSP)	5.68 (SD 2.34)/ 5.95 (SD 2.60)	5.60 (SD 2.66)/ 5.67 (SD 3.10)

SD = standard deviation
Change from pre-test significant* P< .05 **P <.03

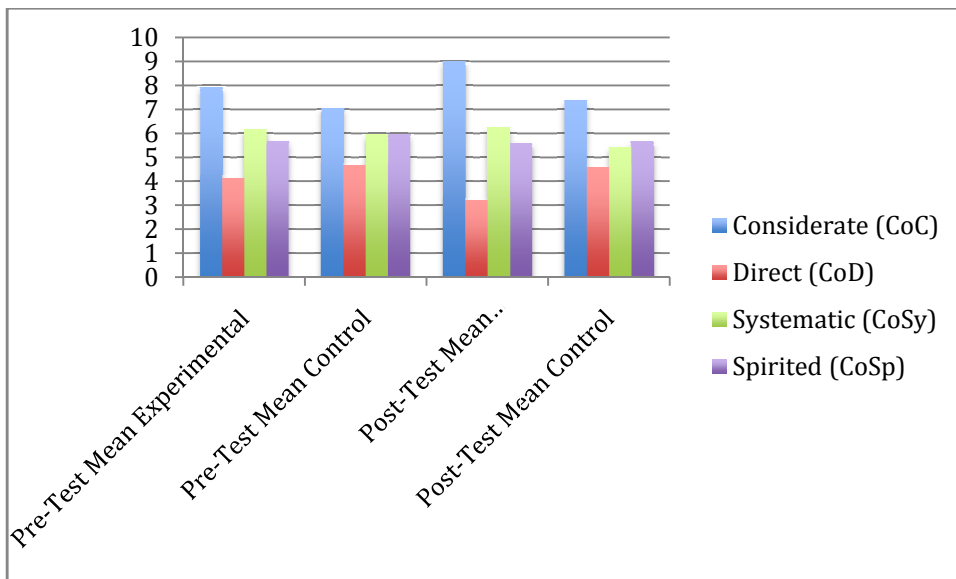
An examination of equivalency between the experimental and control groups showed no significant difference in communication style preference at the start of the experiment. An examination of changes within each group using two-tailed paired sample t-tests showed highly significant differences between pre and post assessment for the two communication style dimension preferences in the experimental group while no differences pre to post-test was seen for the control group participants. A significant increase in preference was found for the considerate communication style (CoC) (t=2.37 (df 45) P = .022) and a significant decrease in preference for the direct communication style (CoD) (t= 2.16 (df 45) P = .036). No significant differences were found in preference for the systematic communication style (CoSy) or the spiritedness communication style (CoSp). Data were normally distributed and Levene's test for equality of variances indicated equality for all comparisons.

As expected, all participants' pre to post preference scores were highly correlated, (CoC) .695 p = .000, (CoD) .704 p =.000, (CoSy) .492 p = .001 and (CoSp) .587 p = .000.

Examination of differences by group showed no change from pre to post-test for any communication preference for the control group. There was no significant change for experimental subjects for systematic or spirited, but a significant increase was seen in considerate (t=2.05 (df 24) p=.05 and a significant decrease was seen in direct t=2.35 (df 24) p=.03. See figure 1 for pre-test and post-test means for the four communication dimensions.

Independent t-tests were used to examine difference between the experimental and control groups at two points. There were no significant differences seen between groups during the pre-test phase. Significant differences between the groups at the post-test phase were found for the considerate communication style (CoC) (t=2.12 (df 44) p=.04 and for the direct communication style (CoD) t=2.03 (df 44) p=.05. There were no significant differences between groups for post-test communication styles for systematic (CoSy) or Spirited (CoSp).

Figure 1 Pre-test and post-test means of communication preferences for participants by group



No debriefing or discussion to provide feedback was conducted after the participant's activities because the study was conducted only to examine the impact of the intervention on communication style dimension preferences. As a result, the student-teachers were not enabled with full understanding of the impact of effective use of communication in a classroom environment to promote an atmosphere for learning which leads to student achievement.

In a classroom we find a variety of student communication styles in addition to the teacher's predominant communication style. In order to promote student learning the teacher should vary their own communication style to meet the communication style needs of individual students. The first step in this process of effective teaching requires teacher awareness of their communication style. The next step is to develop the skill of varying their dominant communication style when needed to promote effective instruction. Although it takes some willingness and effort to expand beyond one's own style to interact with others, it is necessary, as this effort may mean the difference between success and failure in interaction (affecting teacher-student relationships and instructional interactions).

Maximizing communication within a classroom through discovery of teacher and student communication styles can improve classroom efficacy. Congruent with recommendations of the creators of the HDRQ [3] it is important to revisit each person's style throughout the school year to ensure that each person's skills and abilities are being applied to the fullest.

Findings from this initial investigation indicate that student teachers are able to improve their communication from a four-hour workshop designed to increase their self-awareness of personal communication style preference. A highly significant increase in the preference for the considerate communication style dimension and a highly significant decrease in preference for the direct communication style dimension was seen for participants in the experimental group that participated in the workshop. No such change was seen for participants in the control group.

Findings from this initial investigation indicated no difference in the spirited and systematic communication styles was seen between the pre and post-test. This could be a failure of the HDRQ program or it could have been a result of modeling. The context for the workshop activities supported a more considerate communication style where cooperation and a respectful view of others responses was promoted by the facilitators outside the confines of the structured activities, thus presenting the possibility of students modeling the facilitator's behavior in addition to changes resulting from the activities. Indeed the highest scores were seen for this style in both the experimental and control groups. Additional modeling of this style may have occurred because the workshop facilitators also served as classroom teachers in both sections. A cooperative communication style rather than a spirited or systematic communication styles was the semester norm, and therefore modeled during most interactions with student-teachers in both classes (groups). In addition the student-teachers themselves may have found that a considerate communication style as opposed to a systematic or spirited communication style promoted more positive academic and social responses in their own classrooms, thus leading to the higher preferences for this style in both groups.

This is encouraging because a considerate communication style includes characteristics that promote an atmosphere that encourages the personal growth of others. Students have identified these characteristics as ones that positively impact

the learning environment [11]. Likewise, a decrease in the direct communication style is desirable. This is a style that creates an uninviting learning atmosphere. These results indicate the potential of developing research-based curriculum in Educator Preparation Programs that promote a positive learning environment through facilitating awareness about communication styles and interventions that encourage a shift from detrimental styles to beneficial ones. Further research is needed to assess the impact of positive preference shifts in communication style on the classroom environment like it does in a business environment [21].

The next investigation will replicate the training described here. A follow-up session with the experimental group focusing on classroom implementation of their newly learned communication skills will be instituted and then we will follow student- teachers from both the experimental and control groups into their respective classrooms to measure difference in use of communication styles and subsequent student satisfaction. Increases in student achievement related to communication have previously been shown at the university level [22], but there is currently no indication that the HDRQ has been utilized tool in an academic setting.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. Foremost, there were a small number of participants that limited the power to detect differences. A larger sample size would have been required to perform a repeated-measures ANOVA. Secondly, in order to minimize the diffusion or imitation and compensatory rivalry threats to internal validity intact groups at separate locations were used instead of employing random assignment to the experimental and control groups that may have resulted in non-equivalent groups due to different classroom interactions throughout the measurement period. This could be a confounding factor even though there were no significant differences between the groups on the four communication preferences before the intervention as measured by the pre-test. Lastly, external validity was decreased because only students from a single region participated.

4. CONCLUSION

Many believe there is need for Educator Preparation Programs and school districts to incorporate effective classroom communication models that encourage a classroom environment supportive of learning and student achievement. In general considerate communicators may be perceived as promoting the personal growth of others, respecting the views of others and having a vested interest in cooperation, congruent with a supportive learning environment. Direct communicators, on the other hand, may be perceived negatively as opinionated, blunt, brusque, and stubborn, all of which may be detrimental to a classroom environment.

Higher Education Educator Preparation Programs may want to consider infusion of research-based communication curriculum into coursework that increases considerate communication. We examined one such communication program, the HDRQ [3] and found that it was successful in increasing student-teacher preference for a considerate communication style (CoC) likely to promote a positive classroom atmosphere and also successful in decreasing direct communication (CoD) that can potentially decrease it.

Because this was a small pilot project examining the possibility of using the HDRQ in an academic setting, further research is needed to assess the validity of these findings in different student-teacher populations. In addition future researchers could examine if enhancing teacher communication styles results in increased student satisfaction and potentially subsequent academic achievement.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

All authors hereby declare that this experiment has been examined and approved by The University of Houston-Victoria Human Subjects Committee, study number #12021 2/8/2012 and have therefore been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki.

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