

Managing Impression Formation in Computer-Mediated Communication

THESE PROVEN STRATEGIES BENEFIT ONLINE INSTRUCTION AND COMMUNICATION, AND PRODUCE MORE POSITIVE STUDENT EVALUATIONS

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With the development of computer technology, distance education — especially online instruction — has grown quickly in higher education all over the world.

The use of computer technology in education raises many questions as yet unanswered. For example, effective learning involves both intellectual and social-emotional aspects. Typically, however, the intellectual aspects have garnered the most attention in the professional literature describing online instruction and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Nonetheless, successfully managing social and interpersonal considerations, especially the formation of initial impressions, often substantively

influences both learning outcomes and student evaluations of the learning experience. Particularly for students new to instruction via technology, these impressions may have much to do with their satisfaction and learning. Students' judgments about the teacher and the course often affect the efficacy of the instructional process, either positively or negatively.

Following Asch's original work¹ describing impression formation and management in face-to-face (FtF) settings, substantial additional research has addressed impression formation in FtF environments. Research indicates that the medium of communication may significantly influence the attri-

butions that students make and the impressions they form regarding their teachers and the instructional process. Particularly for students new to instruction via technology, these impressions may have much to do with their satisfaction and their subsequent learning behaviors.

In most FtF classrooms, skilled teachers endeavor to promote attributions by students that will facilitate the instructional process (and their subsequent evaluations). Impression formation and development has also become an important topic in CMC.² Based on our research and teaching experience, we recommend a variety of impression management strategies for online instructors and others engaged in CMC.

Differences in Communication

A growing body of evidence (for example, Short, Williams, and Christie³; and Walther⁴) indicates that communication processes change when students and teachers communicate using computer technology rather than in person. According to the Social Presence Theory proposed by Short, Williams, and Christie,⁵ since CMC users cannot interact directly, the lack of nonverbal cues constrains communication.

Hence, CMC users have difficulty in developing interpersonal impressions and relationships. Contrary to the Social Presence Theory, Walther⁶ proposed the Social Information Processing Theory, which posits that CMC communication is socially rich in potential cues used to form interpersonal impressions and relationships.

Consistent with Walther's theory, recent research indicates that CMC involves not just verbal cues, but also nonverbal cues that can be manipulated to develop interpersonal relationships.⁷ Recent studies have investigated the effects of both nonverbal and verbal cues on social-emotional development in CMC. These nonverbal cues include the temporal aspects (the timing, or *chronemics*) of sending and receiving a message,⁸ primacy and

recency effects (first impressions and most recent impressions),⁹ the use of pictographs or typographic marks and emoticons,¹⁰ and the frequency and duration of messaging.¹¹ In addition, Adkins and Brashers¹² studied the effects of verbal cues and found that using a powerful language style could significantly influence impression formation in CMC environments.

Impression Management Strategies for Online Instructors

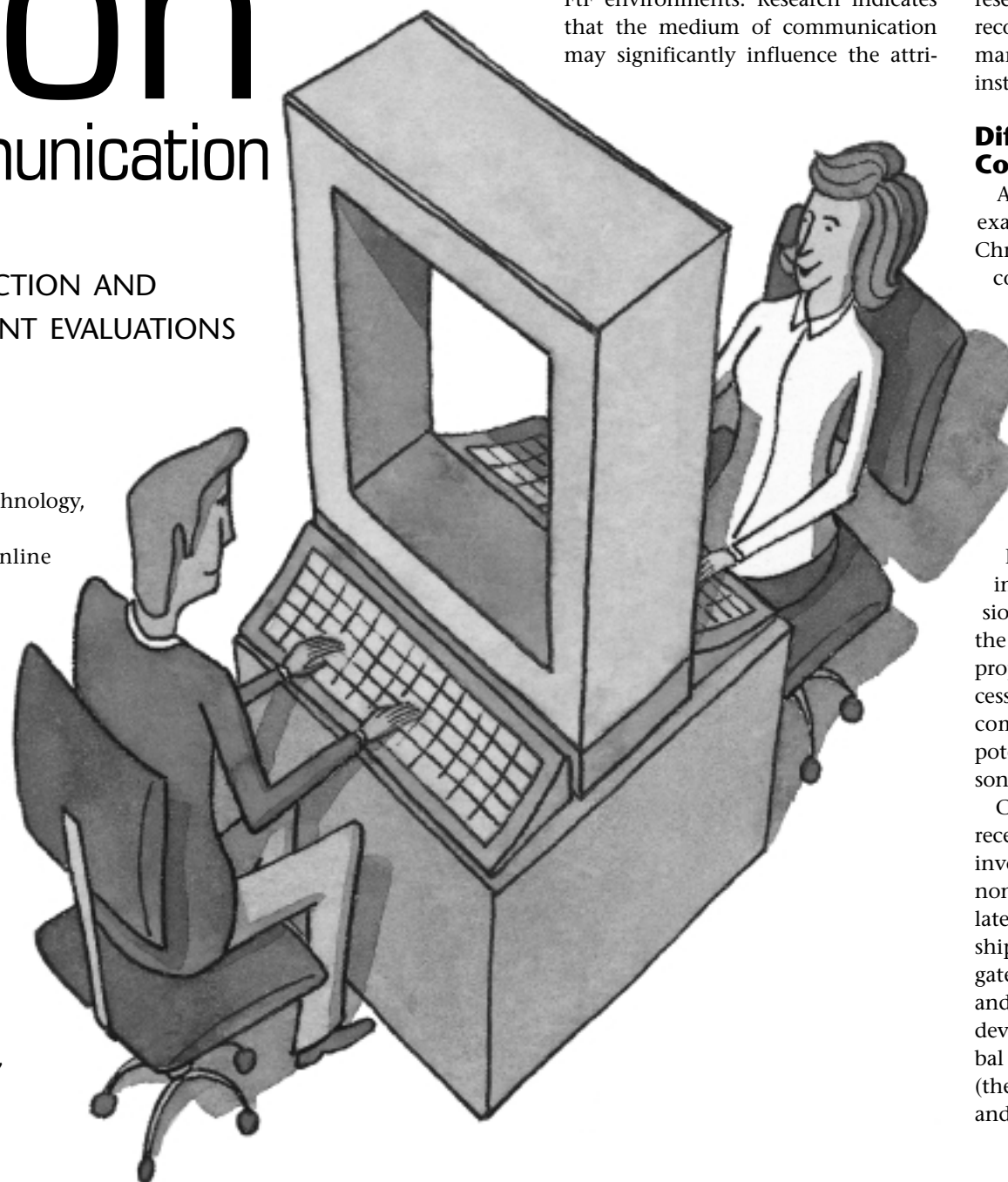
Based on the recent literature in both FtF and CMC environments, we can make the following suggestions regarding verbal and nonverbal impression management strategies for online instructors. These recommendations should facilitate teacher-student or manager-client interactions and help develop constructive relationships that promote learning and productivity.

Some of the recommendations may prove more helpful for asynchronous CMC, while others may better suit synchronous CMC. Specifically, the following recommendations cover nonverbal and verbal strategies. We give examples and applications relevant to online instruction, but applicability to other CMC environments should be apparent.

Nonverbal Strategies for CMC

The nonverbal strategies include eight key points, as follows. (See the sidebar on nonverbal strategies for a listing.)

Paralinguistic Cues. Online instructors can use paralinguistic cues such as emoticons to express their attitudes toward the topic communicated. In a traditional classroom the instructor can easily vary facial expression or tone of voice to engage students. In online instruction the instructor can use emoticons to engage students. Most emoticons (such as smiley faces) are composed using keyboard symbols. Some are extremely simple, and others, highly complex. For instance, ":-)" can express a happy or positive expression, while ":-(" can communi-



cate a sad or negative expression.

Usually, an instructor's thoughtful use of emoticons produces a positive impression in students, communicating a more vivid, dynamic, and graphic impression of the instructor's feelings and actions than would a traditional textual description. For example, emoticons may convey facetiousness on one occasion and sarcasm on another, adding flexibility to otherwise dry communications. Careful, though — emoticons should be used appropriately to avoid rousing an unintended negative reaction in the message recipients.

Chronemics. Online instructors should take timing into account, since variations in chronemic cues can affect students' judgments about their feelings of intimacy with and sense of liking for the instructor and their fellow students, or their feelings of dominance or submissiveness in online instruction. In a traditional course the instructor's interaction primarily takes place in the classroom at a regular time. In online instruction the instructor can manage the timing in delivering the course content and posting assignments on the public bulletin boards, or in offering individual consultation to students.

For instance, most online students are full-time workers with family responsibilities. They often have time to complete the course assignments only in the evenings. If the instructor can arrange a time to answer students' e-mail questions in the evening, the students may develop a more positive impression of the instructor and the course. In addition, such flexibility has obvious implications for online communications between different locations and different time zones.

Frequent Messaging. Online instructors should maintain a high frequency of messaging to increase their "social presence" in the instructional process. In a traditional classroom the instructor may engage in frequent dialogue and interaction with students during class. In online instruction the instructor can main-



Nonverbal Strategies

- Use paralinguistic cues
- Consider timing
- Send messages frequently
- Send longer messages
- Respond to students quickly
- Create and post a detailed syllabus
- Obtain feedback in a timely way
- Send accurate, error-free messages

tain frequent messaging to engage students. For instance, when the instructor assigns a discussion topic on the public bulletin board, periodic instructor responses to student contributions, frequent feedback, or ready consultation can stimulate the discussion. In addition, frequent messaging produces significant positive effects on student impressions and relationship development in online instruction.

Longer Messages. Online instructors should, when appropriate, produce longer messages to increase their social presence. In a traditional classroom the instructor may speak eloquently on a specific topic to engage students. However, in online instruction the knowledgeable instructor may introduce and prompt the discussion by presenting detailed, in-depth consideration of a specific topic or by describing the specific, detailed requirements for assignments. In addition, judicious use of longer messages has significant positive effects on impression development and relationships in online instruction.

Timely Response. Online instructors should strive to respond to student's questions and concerns in a timely manner and in the most appropriate way, such as through private e-mail and voice-mail, public bulletin boards and forums, and online chats. According to Moore, Masterson, Christophel, and Shea,¹³ a speedy reply affects the instructor's nonverbal immediacy, or expression of responsiveness, which has a significant positive effect on the students' evaluation of the instructor.

An efficient way for the instructor to guarantee prompt feedback is to select a "virtual" office schedule during which students may ask questions, such as "8–9 PM Tuesday and Thursday." Such a schedule helps establish the students' confidence in the instructor and the course. An accessible schedule can also reduce students' frustration and, finally, their attrition rate.

Detailed Syllabus. Online instructors should design a detailed course syllabus and take advantage of the primacy effect prior to the beginning of classes to achieve an initial positive impression. Such action effectively engages students at the beginning and reduces the sometimes high attrition rate in online courses.

The primacy effect is crucial for the initiation, development, and maintenance of interpersonal relationships in instruction. In a traditional classroom the instructor typically uses the first class meeting to discuss specifics about the course syllabus and course schedule. In an online class the instructor may have the opportunity to provide the course syllabus and other material before the first day of class. Since most students preregister, the opportunity for early contact can set the stage for effective initiation of instruction as soon as classes officially begin.

Student Feedback. Online instructors can also take advantage of the recency effect during the final week or weeks of class. Usually, the official student evaluation of the instructor is conducted close to the final week. In a tra-

ditional classroom the instructor may solicit student feedback about the course and compliment the students' progress to show commitment to the instructional process and the students. In online instruction the instructor can design anonymous online surveys to solicit student feedback and suggestions about the course several weeks before the final week, plus communicate with individual students via private e-mails. In addition, in online chats and discussions, the instructor may provide a sense of closure and positive termination to the class, producing a favorable impression in students that they then express in their course evaluations thanks to the recency effect.

Accurate Messages. Online instructors should ensure accurate messages with no consistent typing or spelling errors. While this suggestion may seem trivial, such small mistakes are information that students often use to form impressions of the instructor's competency and attention to detail. Moreover, spelling errors may lead to misunderstandings.

In a traditional classroom the instructor doesn't have the advantage of using a spelling checker when presenting material spontaneously on the blackboard. However, in online instruction much of the communication may be asynchronous, allowing the instructor to take advantage of programs that provide spelling and grammar checking. This helps ensure that messages presented on public bulletin boards or through private e-mail remain error free.

Verbal Strategies for CMC

The following recommendations discuss eight verbal strategies (see the sidebar "Verbal Strategies").

Language Norms. Follow accepted and emerging CMC language norms for effective interpersonal communication. While this recommendation may appear obvious, online communication often seems terse and impersonal. Violations of these norms may



Verbal Strategies

- Follow CMC language norms
- Combine narrative and interpersonal schemas
- Use appropriately intense language
- Use strong and immediate language
- Employ a wide vocabulary
- Use a powerful language style
- Apply active-participation language strategies
- Use irony appropriately

engender negative impressions among students and reduce the instructor's evaluations. Beginning initial online conversations with a greeting, taking time to establish communication reciprocity, and providing consistent support and expressions of interest are all practices more likely to engage students in the learning process and promote positive evaluations.

Narrative and Interpersonal Schemas. Online instructors should combine narrative and interpersonal discourse schemas according to the nature of the topic. In a traditional classroom the instructor may alternate narrative and interpersonal schemas to engage the students. Similarly, in online instruction the instructor can use narrative and interpersonal schemas for different purposes.

For instance, the online instructor can use a narrative schema to deliver content and to describe and post assignments on the public bulletin board. Interpersonal schemas can encourage students (especially those feeling frustrated or overwhelmed) to complete the course or can help them

solve technical problems or academic assignments through private e-mail communications or online chats with the instructor. In addition, the instructor can establish an online forum for students' personal and social peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher communication.

Intense Language. Online instructors should use appropriately intense language, such as strongly worded messages, to express their attitudes toward the topic. Research on CMC suggests that, within limits, the more intense the language, the greater the instructional consequence. In traditional classrooms instructors may vary their tone of voice or facial expression to emphasize the importance of a specific theory. The online instructor can use strongly worded messages to emphasize the topic's importance. For instance, the instructor can post messages on the appropriate public bulletin boards, such as "Attention, everyone! This theory is very important because"

Immediate Language. Online instructors should use strong and immediate language to express their attitudes toward the topic communicated. The more immediate language the instructor uses, the more positive the learning effects. According to Moore and colleagues,¹⁴ the instructor's verbal immediacy in instruction has a significant effect on the students' positive evaluation of the instructor. In a traditional classroom the instructor may achieve this goal by moving close to and pointing to different students and saying, "You and you and ... and I will enjoy this course...." In online instruction the instructor can post timely written messages, such as, "We are a learning community, and we'll certainly enjoy this course..." on the public bulletin board or through private e-mail to achieve a similar affirmative effect.

Extensive Vocabulary. Online instructors should use a wide range of vocabulary to express their attitudes

toward the topic communicated. The wider the range of vocabulary the instructor uses, the more positive the students' impression of the instructor. In a traditional classroom the instructor may or may not be able to use a wide range of vocabulary spontaneously. The online instructor often has enough time to select a wide range of words and respond to students' questions asynchronously. For instance, the instructor may introduce a variety of terms to refer to distance education, such as distance learning, online learning, e-learning, Web-based learning, virtual learning, and teleconferencing. In addition, the use of diverse language has implications for communicating effectively in cross-cultural situations — as commonly occurs with online instruction.

Powerful Language. Online instructors should use a powerful language style to express their attitudes toward the topics discussed. The more powerful the language style used, the more effective the instruction. In a traditional classroom the instructor may sometimes exhibit relatively "powerless" language characteristics, such as verbal hedges (like "sort of," "kind of"), intensifiers ("really"), hesitations ("um," "er"), and common and trite forms ("you know"). However, the online instructor often has enough time to carefully craft written messages.

Active Participation Language. Online instructors should use active participation language, a verbal influence strategy, when involved in disagreements or persuasive learning tasks. In a traditional classroom the instructor may use a combination of facial expression, tone of voice, and active participation in a specific learning task with students. In online instruction the instructor can actively participate in contentious learning tasks by posting appropriate evidence strong enough to convince students. This active participation should focus on reciprocity between students and instructors. In addition, online

instructors should adapt their message content to fit students' needs by understanding the latter's unique characteristics and perspectives.

Irony. Online instructors can use appropriate ironic remarks rather than a literal paraphrase or criticism to avoid giving offense. Irony also permits greater control of emotions if someone is attacked or offended by others. In a traditional classroom the instructor may use facial expressions or tones of voice to emphasize ironic remarks. In online situations the instructor can use written words to make ironic remarks in the open public forums or through private e-mail communication. Such remarks should be employed judiciously, of course, but they can reduce a student's emotional frustration in some instances, as when the student has become involved in an inappropriate posting on the bulletin board.

Transferring Strategies

Although most online teachers already have experience in successfully managing nonverbal and verbal impression strategies in traditional classrooms, many of them need to learn how to transfer those strategies to this new, challenging, and quite different environment. Of course, this strategy transference requires lots of practice in online instruction to become effective. Successful transference is an important prerequisite for successful online instruction. Since all of the nonverbal and verbal impression management strategies introduced in this article come from extensive research and practice, online instructors and managers will find them very practical when applied. *e*

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Endnotes

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