Effective Instructional Practice:

Optimizing Your Out-of-Class Communication

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Out-of-class communication is defined as "interactions outside the formal classroom that may be initiated by students or faculty. It includes advising, students seeking out faculty to ask questions about class content, faculty involvement in student organizations, and/or student-faculty discussions about non-class related issues" (Nadler & Nadler, 2001, p. 242). In the classroom, out-of-class communication can enrich in-class lectures and discussions, promote a safe and supportive environment for students and instructors, and foster a sense of connection and trust between students and instructors.

Out-of-class communication can be classified in three different ways: by type, content, and initiator. Types include formal out-of-class communication and informal out-of-class communication. Formal out-of-class communication includes interactions that take place with instructors during office visits (by appointment or during scheduled office hours) or via e-mails and telephone calls. Informal out-of-class communication includes interactions that occur more spontaneously in the hallway, at class break times, before or after class, or at campus events. Content includes both course-related concepts and personal problems. Some students prefer to keep their out-of-class communication with their instructor focused on course-related concepts such as class content, class assignments, and class grades. Other students are more open to discussing personal problems with their instructors. The out-of-class communication initiator can be the student or the instructor. Although out-of-class communication can

be student-initiated or instructor-initiated, students often determine the frequency and length of out-of-class communication and decide whether to sustain out-of-class communication.

Optimizing your out-of-class communication in the classroom is important for three reasons. First, students are more likely to initiate and sustain out-of-class communication with their instructors when instructors exemplify particular attributes. Students prefer instructors who are accessible (Bippus, Kearney, Plax, & Brooks, 2003; Sidelinger, Bolen, McMullen, & Nyeste, 2015); task, socially, and physically attractive (Kennedy-Lightsey & Martin, 2009); credible (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003; Myers, 2004; Nadler & Nadler, 2000, 2001); and immediate (Fusani, 1994; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Knapp & Martin, 2002). Students perceive these instructors as more approachable and available than instructors who do not exemplify these particular attributes.

Second, students are more likely to initiate and sustain out-of-class communication with their instructors when instructors employ specific teaching behaviors. Students prefer to communicate with instructors who self-disclose (Cayanus & Martin, 2004), use affinity-seeking strategies (Myers, Martin, & Knapp, 2005), and incorporate humor (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003; Goodboy, Booth-Butterfield, Bolkan, & Griffin, 2015) as a part of their regular teaching style. Conversely, students prefer not to communicate with instructors who are perceived to be highly assertive (Aylor & Oppliger, 2003) or verbally aggressive (Finn, Shimkowski, O'Shaughnessy, & Heine, 2011; Myers, Edwards, Wahl, & Martin, 2007). Third, out-of-class communication is associated with positive student outcomes. Students who engage in out-of-class communication report enhanced intimacy and shared control (Dobransky & Frymier,

2004), state motivation (Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Knapp & Martin, 2002), learner empowerment (Dobransky & Frymier, 2004; Knapp & Martin, 2003), and communication satisfaction with both their instructors (Frymier, 2005; Vallade & Malachowski, 2015) and advisors (Leach & Wang, 2015).

Five Tips on Using Out-of-Class Communication in the Classroom

1. Communicate to your students that you are an accessible instructor. Each semester, select student-friendly office hours so that students are able to find a day and time that works well with their class schedule and on-campus and off-campus commitments. Clearly identify your office hours and class times on your office door, in your syllabus and learning management system course shell, and your faculty webpage so students know when you are and are not available to meet with them.

2. Offer structured class and advising opportunities when students can meet with you. Structured class opportunities might include finding your office and meeting with you during your office hours, meeting with you to review a speech outline or rough draft of a research paper, or meeting with you as a group to discuss a group project presentation. Structured advising opportunities might include an introductory meeting during the advisee's first month on campus, a meeting to discuss a four-year plan, or a meeting to discuss future opportunities (e.g., internship, study abroad, employment).

3. Outline reasons why students might engage in out-of-class communication throughout the semester. This might include meeting to discuss accommodations or known scheduling conflicts early in the semester, meeting to ask questions about an upcoming exam or receive feedback on a draft of an upcoming assignment mid-semester, or meeting to discuss progress in a course or identify appropriate course

sequencing for the following semester toward the end of the semester.

4. Create a warm and welcoming office environment that promotes out-of-class communication. When possible, leave your office door open so that students know that you are available to meet with them. Organize your office and reduce clutter so you have adequate space to meet with students. Arrange your office furniture to facilitate active listening and discussion. Reduce distractions that may hinder your ability to sustain out-of-class communication.

5. Seek opportunities to engage with students outside of formal class talk and time. This might include volunteering to work your department's table at a preview day for prospective students, register new students at an orientation, speak at a student organization's event, advise majors in your department, mentor an undergraduate research project, or serve as advisor for your campus's Lambda Pi Eta chapter or communication club.

Assessing Your Out-of-Class Communication

To assess your out-of-class communication, do so by completing the nine-item Out of Class Interaction Scale (Knapp & Martin, 2002).

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