Communication: Implications and Reflections

JAMES C. McCROSKEY
AND
VIRGINIA P. RICHMOND

The three research papers represent very different research methodologies, topic areas, and degrees of association with communication concerns. Thus, comparisons among the papers will, for the most part, be of little value. We will, however, address the same issues in our comments on each paper: (1) the appropriateness of the methodology, (2) the relationship of the study to communication concerns, (3) the importance or usefulness of the topic, (4) conclusions we can draw from the research, (5) directions for future research, and finally, (6) implications for classroom teachers.

COMPLEXITY IN TEACHER PLANS

Researchers generally engage in one of two general approaches to research. We have chosen, possibly because of our rural roots, to label these the "honeybee" approach and the "hybrid farmer" approach. Honeybee researchers flit from one topic to another, barely stopping on one topic long enough to extract a bit of sweetness before buzzing on to an unrelated topic. While occasionally this approach to research extracts a finding of importance to a field, most such efforts barely receive passing notice from the significant scholars and practitioners in that field. Hybrid-farmer researchers, in contrast, stay with a topic area until they have generated significant new understandings, new contracts, and/or new ways of doing things. They put things together in ways not examined before and bring forth ideas that did not previously exist. Then, and only then, do they move to a new topic of study. Usually that topic is not wholly unrelated to the previous topic. This is the approach to research that generates most of the important knowledge in any field. It is the work of these researchers that draws most of the attention of the significant scholars and practitioners in that field.

This paper is the interim product of hybrid-farmer researchers who have been pursuing the topic of student resistance of teachers and student

misbehavior. This paper explores the association of type of misbehavior with the complexity of plans generated by teachers for coping with that misbehavior. This is part of an overall program of research, but the first study directly looking at teacher planning behaviors. Hence, we must look at the paper in this broader context.

Methodological appropriateness. We are not generally positively disposed toward simulation research methodologies because of their usually low ecological validity. However, in this instance the simulation methodology employed is quite appropriate. The use of real in-service teachers is an important strength of this study. The use of simulation is most appropriate when the researcher(s) is exploring a new branch of a topic, as is the case here, and is not certain what to expect. Creating student misbehaviors in a naturalistic classroom environment is not something one should do without being very certain one can keep the situation under control. Hence, initial experimental work with student misbehavior, of necessity, should be outside the natural environment.

The simulation methodology has a major advantage in that it permits creation of conditions which might be very difficult to find in a natural classroom environment, and it permits combinations of conditions which might be even more difficult to study in that environment. Thus, the researchers in this instance were able to cross student sex with type of misbehavior. Presumably in the attempt to create greater generalizability, different student names were used in the two male conditions as was the case in the female conditions. Also, each type of misbehavior was represented by a different example in each of its two conditions. Had the results of the study produced a significant main effect for sex, or a significant main effect for type of misbehavior, or both, everything would have been fine. Unfortunately, the worst possible result, in terms of interpretation, was the result obtained—an interaction of sex and misbehavior type. Nothing in the previous literature should have led the researchers to expect such a result; hence we have an example of Murphy's law at work!

In a clean design of this study, the student name and description in each male condition would have been the same; similarly the student name and description in each female condition. The student misbehavior described in each "teacher-owned" condition would have been identical, and the student misbehavior in each "student-owned" condition would have been identical. Then if an interaction had been observed, it could have been interpreted to be a function of misbehavior type interacting with student sex. Since neither of these circumstances existed—there were four different students identified, and four different misbehaviors—the results cannot be interpreted unambiguously. For all we know, the results in condition 1 could have been because teachers just don't like people named Carl! Or maybe it is just that comic books cause

teachers to make plans quickly. We use these comparatively silly explanations not to suggest that they are likely to be the real reason for the results, but to indicate that even silly conclusions cannot be ruled out by the design of the study. The only way to know how to interpret the present results is to do the study over with consistent manipulations across conditions in place of the inconsistent ones used in the present study.

Communication concerns.   This concern with communication in this overall research program is strong. However, in the present study the focus is mostly on types of student misbehavior and their effect on teacher planning for dealing with those misbehaviors, plans which presumably would involve communication.

Topic importance.   Student misbehaviors and teachers' response to and prevention of those misbehaviors are of major importance. This is, a very important topic and the research program likely will produce valuable information for teachers and teachers educators.

Conclusions.   As we noted previously, we are not able to draw firm conclusions from this study. However, when additional research is completed, we anticipate important conclusions will be possible.

Future research.   As we suggested above, the immediate follow-up research should unconfound the sex and misbehavior types considered in the present study. Beyond that, we believe the researchers should consider the possibility of expanding their typology of student misbehaviors, an effort they have touched upon in previously published efforts. We doubt that "student-owned" and "teacher-owned" classifications do justice to the complexity of the issue of misbehaviors, although this distinction does seem to us to be quite important. Although previous research provides considerable communication-based guidance for teachers to *prevent* misbehaviors (for example, employ immediate behaviors, use a variety of affinity-seeking strategies, avoid antisocial control techniques), even the best teacher will sometimes confront misbehaviors. It is important to determine if different communication strategies are needed for different types of misbehaviors, and that necessitates development of a solid typology of recognizable student misbehaviors and testing various communication strategies for dealing with those problems.

Implications for teachers.   Although the design and results of this study do not permit us to draw implications for teachers, as this program of research progresses important implications should be forthcoming.

Infusing a Multicultural Perspective

This paper reports a study designed to test the effectiveness of a program to develop more positive attitudes toward cultural diversity in a college student population. The approach of the program is chosen from a variety of approaches which are described in the paper.

Methodological appropriateness. The general design of the study is a classic pretest, posttest experiment with one experimental group and one control group. The students were assigned to the two groups on the first day of class in a basic communication course (sixty to each group) and were not informed they were in an experiment until the end of the course. Remarkably, all sixty in each group were still present at the end of the semester and all completed both the pretest and the posttest. It is not specified how the students were assigned to groups nor how it was possible to retain all subjects for the entire semester, a feat we have never been able to accomplish.

It would appear that the design and execution of this study was flawless, until the very last day. Then, the researchers made a critical error. They report the students were debriefed and told they were part of a study designed to measure the effectiveness of the training program that had been included in their class, and *then* the subjects were asked to complete the posttest measure.

The exact nature of that debriefing is not reported, but the students in the experimental condition would certainly have known they were in a class that really stressed cultural concerns. Similarly, the students in the control group would have known they did not have any training that emphasized cultural concerns. Hence, it is most likely the obtained results were at least in part, if not entirely, a function of the students trying to behave like good subjects. On the primary measure, the experimental students raised their prodiversity scores about twice as much as the control group (6 points to 3 points) and on the antidiversity scores their change was about 18 points in the positive direction, whereas the control group change was about 2 points in the negative direction. Clearly the students in the experimental group did not want to identify with negative statements about diversity after being in a training program to get them not to agree with such statements.

It would be satisfying to believe that these results indicate the effectiveness of this program. However, in these days of "political correctness" on college campuses, it would be a naive student indeed who would complete an attitude questionnaire expressing antidiversity attitudes right after being told he/she had just completed a course designed to get her/him not to express such atti-

tudes. This would be particularly the case if he/she has to put her/his name on the questionnaire (or code number) so the researcher could match it with the same questionnaire collected at the beginning of the semester.

Unfortunately, the inappropriate timing of the debriefing in this study precludes our drawing any meaningful conclusions about the tested program. We can only recommend the study be redone with the debriefing held until all data on the Survey of Groups instruments have been collected.

Communication concerns.   The concern of this study was with a program to change student attitudes of matters of cultural diversity. Although the persuasive campaign was embedded in a basic communication course, this was not a communication study. No communication variables or processes were involved as study targets. While the training program itself could be viewed as a composite of communication strategies for producing attitude change, these concerns were not the focus of this study.

Topic importance.   Matters of cultural diversity and the acceptance of such diversity are a major concern for all educational systems. However, this does not make such concerns *communication* concerns. The development of methods for teaching students to accept people from other cultures and their diverse ways is necessary if we are to have a society in which there is harmony among the various groups of people composing the society. However, we should take care that we do not impose such instruction at the cost of not meeting other educational objectives. It was most interesting to us that in the present study, no effort was made to determine whether the cultural diversity program's introduction into the basic communication course had any impact on the primary objectives of that course. Such courses are not adopted because of a primary objective of facilitating cultural diversity, so it is important to learn if the real objectives of the course were meet better with the new program, there was no difference, or some course objectives had to be sacrificed in the name of education about cultural diversity. Clearly, the researchers in this instance did not care one way or the other. In the future, we hope such insensitivity to the objectives of the established system will not be present. Even if the results of the present investigation were not confounded by the design, we still would not know what we lost in order to gain these results.

Conclusions.   As we noted above, the design of the study does not permit us to draw firm conclusions.

Future research.   As we noted previously, this study needs to be redone with appropriate timing for the debriefing. It also is important that this research

program examine what is *lost* as well as what is gained by substituting the MECT program into an ongoing course. If the basic course studied is so poorly designed that several days of it can be eliminated with no cost to the students with regard to meeting the objectives of that course, that is one thing. If, however, the course is well designed, with clearly stated objectives and appropriate measures to determine whether those objectives are met, the students in the experimental group *should* show a deficit in meeting the regular course objectives compared to the control group. The well-designed study should be able to identify both the gains in terms of knowledge and/or affect related to cultural diversity and the losses in terms of knowledge and/or affect related to communication. With this information available, those administering and teaching the basic communication course will be in a better position to determine whether the new approach should be retained over the old one. An alternative, of course, is that the new unit be added to some other course in the university (sociology, political science, history) rather than the communication course. At any rate, tests of innovative instructional systems should always be grounded in the normal reality of educational systems—there is a finite limit on instructional time, hence the addition of one instructional package presumes the elimination of another instructional package. When that is not the case, such must be proven. When it is the case, the new package and its objectives must be proven superior to the old one and its objectives.

Implications for teachers. Since we cannot draw firm conclusions from the present study, there are no direct implications of the study for teachers. However, future research with an appropriate design may indicate that the MECT program is an effective method for enhancing prodiversity attitudes in college students.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS

This paper is much different from the other two papers we have examined. It focuses on a highly successful program designed to help Hispanic adolescents prepare for college in an attempt to identify the factors which make that program successful.

Methodological appropriateness. This paper reports an ethnographic study drawing on the theoretical position that Hispanic children are instilled with a very high value for the family and achieving for the family. The teacher/student interaction in the classroom is observed to determine the use of these values to

motivate Hispanic children in the program. While ethnographic methods are somewhat less precise than experimental methods, such as those discussed in the previous papers, a study of a successful program often benefits from the added flexibility this methodology provides. With the sacrifice of some precision, of course, comes increased difficulty for the critic to determine whether the observations made were appropriate, were accurately reported, and were not subject to the normal selectivity processes of human beings. Since we have not observed what the writer has observed, we will assume the accuracy and appropriateness of the observations as reported for this analysis.

Communication concerns. A surface reading of this paper would indicate that the only concern with communication in it is the use of the communicative messages of the teacher and students to determine what ideas are being communicated and to what motives the teacher is appealing. A careful reading of the manuscript, however, suggests to us that the writer is identifying as the factor which leads to the success of this program an element long known to be highly associated with effective communication, the element of "homophily."

Homophily can be roughly translated as "similarity." It involves similarity in background (culture), attitudes, values, and perceptions. One of the most solidly substantiated principles in communication theory is the principle of homophily: The more two people are alike, the more effectively they will communicate, and the more similar they will become. In essence, the present paper is a case study illustrating that important communication principle. It is homophily which this study found to be the factor that makes this program for Hispanic youth so successful.

Topic importance. Finding out why successful educational programs are successful certainly is important. While one would think that most successful programs are such because people knew in advance what would work and thus implemented the program in that form, we all know that is not always the case. In this case, many communication specialists would have advised (in advance) that programs for youth in special groups will be more effective if taught by people from those groups or people who at least have extensive experience with those groups. For these people, the results of this study are obvious, and to have found otherwise would be very surprising. We suspect the people who chose to hire an ex-Peace Corps worker with experience working with Hispanic populations expected him to be more successful with Hispanic young people because of his experience.

Conclusions. The bottom-line conclusion of this research is that teacher education programs must find ways to give prospective teachers experiences with

the culture or cultures of the students they plan to teach so that they can develop more homophily with those students. We agree fully with that conclusion. However, we must add caution to the recommendation. Preservice teachers may not have any idea what kind of students they are likely to be asked to teach. Thus, their program may give them experiences with the African-American community and then their teaching position may take them to Appalachia and all-Caucasian students of Scottish and Irish descent, or the opposite. The point is that the advice is good, but the implementation of it is difficult, at best. And what if the teacher takes a position where classrooms are really *multi*cultural, where the cultural values of one group may be directly counter to the cultural values of another group. How then is the teacher to adapt to such diversity?

Future research.   The present paper was drawn from a theory related to the importance of family values of "Mexican American" and "African American" children compared to "Anglos." If "Anglo" is used as a referent of only people of English descent, such distinctions may be accurate; we are not certain. However, if it is sued to reference non-Spanish Caucasians, as is characteristically done in Hispanic communities, this theory needs major work. Any time spent in an Italian-American, Greek-American, or Polish-American community would indicate the absurdity of this theory, as would spending time with Irish Americans in the back country of Appalachia. We believe homophily was the factor in operation in making this school program successful, not "familia." "Familia" was simply one of many manifestations of the teacher's adaptations to the students based on his understanding of their culture.

Implications for teachers.   We hope that a reading of this paper will help preservice teachers understand just how difficult it is to communicate effectively with students who are from a culture (or cultures) unfamiliar to the teacher. Young teachers with nothing but positive motivations to help young people from divergent cultural backgrounds often seek teaching positions in schools which serve such students. Only later do they learn that good motivations are not enough to make one an effective teacher. One of the basic principles of communication is that one must know one's receiver and adapt one's communication to that receiver if one is to be an effective teacher of children from a culture other than one's own; one must expend the time and effort necessary to learn about that culture and how to adapt to people from it. Good motivations are useful only if directed in the right ways.