Personalized Education and Student Motives for Communicating with Instructors: An Examination of Chinese and American Classrooms

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was twofold: to (a) investigate the relationships between Chinese and U.S. students' perceptions of a personalized education and their motives for communicating with an instructor and (b) examine cultural differences between these perceptions. Participants were 435 undergraduate students enrolled in a university from mainland China or the U.S who completed a questionnaire. Results indicated that across both cultures, personalized education was related positively to the relational, functional, participatory, and sycophancy motives. However, U.S. students reported more of a personalized education whereas Chinese students reported communicating more for the relational, excuse-making, and sycophancy motives. [China Media Research. 2012; 8(2): 94-100]

Keywords: Personalized education, student motives for communicating, instructional communication

With concerns over increasing class sizes, inflated tuition, and potential career placement, students now, more than ever, value a personalized education. A personalized education creates student perceptions of individualized attention from instructors in an effort to meet students' needs (Waldeck, 2007). As Waldeck (2006) noted, "in an attempt to deliver personalized education, universities and their faculty engage in a variety of activities that include developing relationships with students both in and out of the classroom, reducing class sizes, implementing various types of personalized education plans, and facilitating collaborative learning experiences in the classroom" (p. 346).

To help define a research agenda for personalized education, Waldeck (2006) advocated that researchers begin by "demonstrating the extent to which personalized education meets the needs of a diverse student population that includes individuals with differing cultural expectations for student/teacher relationships" (p. 351). The current study addresses Waldeck's call by examining similarities and differences between student perceptions of personalized education in the U.S. and China. Moreover, this study examines student communication responses to perceived personalized education in the college classroom by exploring student communication motives.

Personalized Education

Waldeck (2006) explained that many universities promote personalized education plans (PEPs) in order to provide individualized curriculum, assessment, and collaborative learning experiences for students. However, as Waldeck (2006) also noted, the idea behind personalized education lacks a clear conceptualization and scant research has examined the instructor communication behaviors that create student perceptions of personalized education in the college classroom. To remedy this lack of empirical research, Waldeck (2007) conducted seminal research to reveal what instructors say and do to create personalized education perceptions for students. Waldeck (2007) found (in rank order) that students perceive a personalized education when instructors (a) shared their time outside of class for student needs, (b) provided counsel to students, (c) exhibited competent communication, (d) formed personal relationships with students, (e) showed flexibility with course requirements, and (f) provided special favors to students. From these results, Waldeck (2007) created a quantitative measure of personalized education and through factor analysis, revealed three distinct dimensions including instructor accessibility (e.g., holding office hours, helping students outside of class, giving advice), course-related practices (e.g., changing the syllabus based on student suggestions, using unique teaching activities, providing special favors), and instructor interpersonal competence (i.e., using students' names, being approachable and friendly, relating to students). Furthermore, she discovered that when instructors communicated a personalized education, students perceived them as more immediate and more of a mentor, engaged in more out-of-class communication, and reported more cognitive and affective learning. Clearly, then, fostering student perceptions of a personalized education yields real benefits for students. However, no other published studies to date have researched further benefits of a personalized education. One potential benefit of a receiving a personalized education involves the resulting communication that

occurs in the classroom between students and the instructor. Although Waldeck (2007) found that students are more likely to communicate outside of class with an instructor who communicates a personalized education, it is likely that their communication in class is influenced as well. One way to operationalize student communication in class is by examining their motives for communicating with an instructor.

Student Motives for Communicating

Much of student communication in the classroom is influenced by the teaching behaviors that are observed by students throughout the semester. This student communication, which is frequently strategic and planned, is driven by their motives for communicating. Martin, Myers, and Mottet (1999) identified five motives that students report for communicating with an instructor. These motives are relational (i.e., to develop a personal relationship with an instructor), functional (i.e., to acquire information about the course or content), excuse-making (i.e., to explain why work expectations are not being met), participatory (i.e., to offer comments or questions), and sycophancy (i.e., to create a favorable impression).

Generally, students will communicate for relational, functional, and participatory motives (and sometimes the excuse-making and sycophancy motives) when instructors display affirming and competent teaching behaviors and avoid incompetent behaviors. For instance, student motives for communicating are influenced positively by a plethora of affirming and competent teaching behaviors including teacher confirmation (Goodboy & Myers, 2008), verbal approach strategies (Mottet, Martin, & Myers, 2004), socio-communicative style (Myers, Martin, & Mottet, 2002), self-disclosure (Cayanus, Martin, & Goodboy, 2009), humor (Dunleavy, 2006), verbal and nonverbal immediacy (Gendrin & Rucker, 2007), functional communication skills (Myers & Bryant, 2005), and communicator style (Myers, Mottet, & Martin, 2000). Likewise, student motives are associated negatively with incompetent teaching behaviors such as teacher misbehaviors (Goodboy, Myers, & Bolkan, 2010), verbal aggressiveness (Myers, Edwards, Wahl, & Martin, 2007), and antisocial power use (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2011).

Student motives are also influenced by the perceived quality of instruction. Student motives are related positively to cognitive learning and affective learning (Martin, Mottet, & Myers, 2000), communication satisfaction (Goodboy, Martin, & Bolkan, 2009), and perceived in-group status (Myers, 2006). Also, students' educational outcomes, including learner empowerment (Weber, Martin, & Cayanus, 2005), learner orientation (Williams & Frymier, 2007), and academic stress and anxiety (Martin, Cayanus, Weber, & Goodboy, 2009) are related to student motives.

Collectively, the research on student motives suggests that competent instruction, coupled with student affect and satisfaction, influences whether students are motivated to communicate with their instructors. Creating a classroom of personalized education is considered to be competent instruction (Waldeck, 2007) and is likely to create student satisfaction because students appreciate a personalized education (Waldeck, 2006, 2007). When students are satisfied with the quality of instruction and communication with their instructor, they are more likely to communicate for the relational, functional, participatory, and sycophancy motives (Goodboy et al., 2009; Myers, 2006). Consequently, it is likely that a personalized education will yield a quality instructor-student relationship and motivate students to communicate for the same reasons. Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered:

H1: Personalized education will be associated positively with student motives for communicating (i.e., relational, functional, participatory, excuse making, sycophancy) in the U.S. and China.

However, cultural differences in instruction are likely to yield differential student communication behavior. As McCroskey and McCroskey (2006) noted, although effective instructor communication in the U.S. yields the same desirable classroom outcomes in other cultures (e.g., Zhang, 2009; Zhang & Huang, 2008), it is important to study "instructional communication from a wholly different culture's assumptions" (p. 44). These assumptions and cultural differences in instruction might yield nuances in student communication. In comparisons of the U.S. and Chinese classrooms specifically, differences have been reported in student communication behavior (Goodboy, Bolkan, Beebe, & Shultz, 2010). Moreover, instructor communication behaviors such as power use (Goodboy, Bolkan, Myers, & Zhao, 2011), behavior alteration techniques (Lu, 1997), immediacy (Myers, Zhong, & Guan, 1998; Zhang & Zhang, 2006), affinity seeking (Myers & Zhong, 2004), clarity (Zhang & Zhang, 2005), and credibility (Zhang, 2011) operate differently in Chinese classrooms. Although student perceptions of a personalized education should yield similar student reactions in both cultures, it is possible that these perceptions differ as a function of culture. Accordingly, the following research questions are offered:

RQ1: Are there differences in student perceptions of personalized education between the U.S. and Chinese cultures?

RQ2: Are there differences in student reports of motives for communicating with instructors between the U.S. and Chinese cultures?

Method

Participants

Participants were 435 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory or upper level college courses at mid-sized universities in the United States and in mainland China. Participants were 93 men and 159 women (6 unreported) whose ages ranged from 18 to 45 years (M = 19.63, SD = 2.01) in the United States and 44 men and 103 women (30 unreported) from 18 to 25 years old (M = 19.27, SD = .95) in China.

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants completed an anonymous questionnaire consisting of the Personalized Education Scale (Waldeck, 2007) and Student Motives for Communicating Scale (Martin et al., 1999), along with demographic questions. The measures used in China were translated into Mandarin Chinese, and there were no problems observed in the translation process after back translation. Participants completed this survey in reference to the instructor and course they attended immediately prior to the data collection (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986) at the end of the semester.

Personalized Education Scale. The scale is 25 items and measures instructor behaviors that create student perceptions of a personalized education. It uses a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very often* (5). This scale consists of three subscales that operationalize instructor accessibility (9 items), course-related practices (9 items), and instructor interpersonal competence (7 items). Previous reliability coefficients have ranged from .86 to .91 for the subscales (Waldeck, 2007). In this study, the obtained Cronbach alphas ranged from .86 to .92 (instructor accessibility: M = 24.04, SD = 7.17, α = .87; course-related practices: M = 23.77, SD = 7.52, α = .86; instructor interpersonal competence: M = 25.11, SD = 6.39, α = .85).

Student Motives for Communicating Scale. The scale is 30 items and measures reasons why students choose to communicate with their instructors. It uses a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from *not at all like me* (1) to *exactly like me* (5). This scale consists of five subscales that assess relational, functional, participatory, excuse-making, and sycophancy motives. Previous reliability coefficients have ranged from .88 to .91 (Goodboy & Myers, 2008). In this study, the obtained Cronbach alphas ranged from .86 to .92 (relational: M = 13.78, SD = 5.47, α = .92; functional: M = 20.73, SD = 5.51, α = .91; excuse-making: M = 14.42, SD = 5.23, α = .88; participatory: M = 13.03, SD = 5.38, α = .88; sycophancy: M = 12.85, SD = 4.85, α = .86).

Results

To examine the hypothesis, Pearson correlations were computed. Intercorrelations between variables across both cultures are reported in Table 1. This hypothesis was generally supported for the U.S. sample, but only partially supported for the China sample. Among U.S. students, all three dimensions of personalized education (i.e., instructor accessibility, course-related practices, and interpersonal competence) were associated positively with all five student motives for communicating with one exception (i.e., a lack of a significant positive correlation between interpersonal competence and the excuse-making motive). Among Chinese students, all three dimensions of personalized education were associated positively with the relational and participatory motives, the course-related practices and interpersonal competence dimensions of personalized education were associated positively with the functional and the sycophancy motives, and none of the three dimensions of personalized education were significantly associated with the excuse-making motive.

Table 1. *Correlations between variables in U.S. and China*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
United States (N =258)							
1. Instructor Accessibility	---						
2. Course-Related Practices	.68†	---					
3. Interpersonal Competence	.67†	.65†	---				
4. Relational Motive	.47†	.43†	.40†	---			
5. Functional Motive	.24†	.23†	.35†	.29†	---		
6. Excuse-Making Motive	.13*	.22†	.05	.32†	.33†	---	
7. Participatory Motive	.30†	.33†	.23†	.52†	.41†	.49†	---
8. Sycophancy Motive	.14*	.22†	.13*	.43†	.26†	.43†	.65†

China (N =177)

1. Instructor Accessibility	---						
2. Course-Related Practices	.43†	---					
3. Interpersonal Competence	.61†	.73†	---				
4. Relational Motive	.48†	.56†	.55†	---			
5. Functional Motive	.09	.18*	.28†	.41†	---		
6. Excuse-Making Motive	.14	.12	.11	.25**	.18*	---	
7. Participatory Motive	.32†	.41†	.32†	.48†	.34†	.31†	---
8. Sycophancy Motive	.16	.26**	.25**	.32†	.17*	.29†	.61†

Note. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. †$p < .001$. Two-tailed.

To examine RQ1, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was calculated with the two cultures (i.e., U.S., China) serving as the independent variable and the summed scores on the Personalized Education Scale serving simultaneously as the dependent variable. The MANOVA produced a statistically significant model, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.93$, F (3, 421) = 10.03, $p < .001$. A significant univariate effect was discovered for both instructor accessibility F (1, 423) = 14.26, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$, with U.S. students reporting more accessibility (M = 25.06, SD = 6.77) than Chinese students (M = 22.44, SD = 7.40). Also, a significant univariate effect was discovered for instructor interpersonal competence, F (1, 423) = 14.38, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$; with U.S. students reporting more instructor interpersonal competence (M = 26.07, SD = 6.68) than Chinese students (M = 23.73, SD = 5.68). A univariate effect was not discovered for course related practices, F (1, 423) = 0.77, $p > .05$.

To examine RQ2, a second MANOVA was calculated with the two cultures (i.e., U.S., China) serving as the independent variable and the five student motives for communicating serving simultaneously as the dependent variables. The MANOVA produced a statistically significant model, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.71$, F (5, 428) = 34.69, $p < .001$. Significant univariate effects were discovered for the relational motive, F (1, 432) = 103.24, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$; excuse-making motive, F (1, 432) = 9.07, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .02$; and sycophancy motive, F (1, 432) = 11.25, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Significant effects were not discovered for the functional motive, F (1, 432) = .57, $p > .05$, or participatory motive, F (1, 432) = 1.17, $p > .05$. Chinese students reported communicating more with instructors for relational (M = 16.65, SD = 4.57), excuse-making (M = 13.95, SD = 5.02), and sycophancy (M = 13.75, SD = 4.44) reasons than U.S. students (respectively M = 11.77, SD = 5.13; M = 12.39, SD = 5.54; M = 12.19, SD = 5.00).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between an instructor's delivery of personalized education and students' motives for communicating with an instructor. This study also sought to examine differences in Chinese and U.S. student perceptions of personalized education and their student motives. Three general findings were discovered. First, for both cultures, an instructor's use of course-related practices and instructor interpersonal competence was associated positively with the relational, functional, participatory, and sycophancy motives. However, although the use of instructor accessibility was related positively to these same motives in the U.S., only the relational and participatory motives reached statistical significance in China. It appears that instructor accessibility is more influential for student communication in the U.S. classrooms. At the same time, the second general finding is that U.S. students reported significantly more instructor accessibility and instructor interpersonal competence than Chinese students.

These two findings may be due to the relational nature that exists in many U.S. classrooms. As several instructional communication scholars (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Graham, West, & Schaller, 1992; Scott & Nussbaum, 1981) have noted, effective instruction is interpersonally driven. That is, student-instructor interaction in U.S. classrooms embraces a relational approach to teaching where both parties mutually create a classroom environment characterized by trust, honesty, and responsiveness; a willingness to listen; and the expression of emotion (Mottet & Beebe, 2006). At the same time, U.S. instructors are known to engage in self-disclosure (i.e., information about instructors that students are unlikely to glean from any source other than the instructor; Sorensen, 1989) about themselves, which often leads to an increase in students' in-class participation (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994) and out-of-class communication with their instructors (Cayanus & Martin, 2004). For many U.S. students, then, their expectations for effective instruction revolved around whether they consider their instructors to communicate in a relational manner. In the Chinese classroom, however, while interpersonally-driven instruction is appreciated by students (and may affect positively whether students are motivated to communicate with their instructors, as found in this study), interpersonally-

driven communication is neither expected nor is the absence of such communication considered detrimental to classroom instruction. As Zhang and Oetzel (2006) noted, Chinese instructors are treated as an authority figure who expect obedience and conformity from their students. Thus, it makes sense that U.S. students would rate their instructors as possessing higher levels of accessibility and competence than Chinese students.

Although U.S. instructors may use more of relational approach to teaching, Chinese students do appreciate relational communication with their instructors too (Gan, 2009).

The third general finding is that Chinese students reported communicating more for the relational, excuse-making, and sycophantic motives than U.S. students. These results may indicate that Chinese students are more concerned with impression management and fostering a relationship with their instructor. The relational motive produced the strongest difference, accounting for 19% of the variance. This finding is not surprising when considering that Chinese students view the instructor-student relationship differently than U.S. students. As Zhang (2005) explained, "Chinese teachers assume the role of parents, which is shown in the saying 'a teacher a day, a parent forever'" (p. 111). Moreover, Chinese students value relational hierarchy and interpersonal harmony more than other East Asian cultures such as Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005). As Abubaker (2008) noted, the Chinese classroom is characterized by a high power distance and respect for instructors, where "Chinese students believe that the teacher should be revered and admired because s/he has knowledge" (p. 117). The data coincide with previous research, indicating that Chinese students are more concerned with what the instructor thinks of them, as well as the relational bond that is formed in the classroom. Chinese students may communicate more excuse-making to lessen perceptions of learner incompetence when their work is late or inadequate. Chinese students have a strong motivation to succeed in the classroom and please their instructor (Gan, 2009). Excuse-making may be motivated by a need to reduce perceived failure for not meeting educational expectations in an effort to preserve student competence.

Chinese students may communicate more for the sycophantic and relational motives to create affinity and form a relationship. Chinese students view their instructors more as lifelong mentors than U.S. students, who view the instructor-student relationship as more temporary. As Huang and Brown (2009) explained, Chinese "teachers do not only teach the students knowledge, but also help students choose their future careers…as the Chinese saying goes 'one day's teacher, a lifetime master'" (p. 645). Other research supports the idea that Chinese students are more relationally driven than U.S. students. Chinese students use more student affinity-seeking strategies with their instructors by influencing perceptions of closeness, flirting, communicating altruism, and giving gifts (Goodboy et al., 2010). They also engage in more out-of-class communication than U.S. students, primarily to talk about personal issues, unlike U.S. students, who visit instructors more for course-related issues (Zhang, 2006). Altogether, these results imply that U.S. students are less concerned with forming an interpersonal relationship with their instructor and creating favorable impressions.

The current study does have limitations. The first limitation is that the U.S. operationalization of personalized education was applied to the Chinese classroom. It is entirely possible that Chinese student perceptions of a personalized education may be conceptually different and warrant a different measure. For example, Zhang and Oetzel (2006) found that the measurement of teacher immediacy necessitated a new operationalization for China because U.S. measures lacked validity in that culture. Instructional communication researchers must not assume that constructs are conceptually and operationally defined the same across cultures, given the drastic differences in classroom values, instructional practices, and assumptions about learning. The second limitation is that the translation process could have yielded minor semantic errors. Future research should continue to examine instructor and student communication across cultures in order to determine which behaviors are pancultural or culturally distinct. Too much of instructional communication research attempts to generalize findings gathered from small samples collected in U.S. classrooms.

In conclusion, the findings from this study provide further evidence for the benefits of creating a personalized educational experience. Students in both cultures appear to appreciate such efforts, and report being more motivated to communicate with their instructor for a variety of reasons. Additionally, U.S. students reported that their instructors communicate more of a personalized education, whereas Chinese students reported communicating more to enhance their relational bonds and manage their impressions with their instructors. Understanding these cultural similarities and differences between U.S. and Chinese students may help instructional communication researchers provide a more comprehensive view of the instructor-student relationship, which is fostered through mutual communication in the classroom.

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