Qualitative Research Reports in Communication

Behavioral Indicators of Transformational Leadership in the College Classroom

San Bolkan [a] & Alan K. Goodboy [b]

[a] Department of Communication Studies, California State University,
Long Beach, CA

[b] Department of Communication Studies, Bloomsburg University of
Pennsylvania, Bloomsburg, PA

Available online: 07 Oct 2011

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Behavioral Indicators of Transformational Leadership in the College Classroom

San Bolkan & Alan K. Goodboy

The purpose of this study was to identify which instructor communication behaviors students believe promote transformational leadership (i.e., charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation) in the college classroom. Participants were 166 undergraduate students who wrote three narratives describing behaviors their instructors engaged in that created perceptions of transformational leadership according to Bass's (1985) operationalization. Results of a content analysis (in rank order for each dimension) revealed that (a) charisma was communicated through teacher confirmation, nonverbal immediacy, humor, caring, availability, content relevance, verbal immediacy, attitude homophily, equality, and self-disclosure; (b) individualized consideration was communicated through teacher availability, individualized feedback, verbal immediacy, personalized content, conveying interest, special considerations, student history, and encouraging participation; and (c) intellectual stimulation was communicated through teaching style, challenging students, independent thought, classroom participation, humor, and content relevance.

Keywords: Classroom Communication; Instructor Behaviors; Transformational Leadership

Scholars of instructional communication have examined a variety of effective teaching behaviors that help facilitate student learning in the college classroom (Nussbaum, 1992). Recently, scholars have begun examining teacher leadership in

San Bolkan (PhD, University of Texas–Austin, 2007) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies, California State University, Long Beach-AS 350, 1250 Bellflower Boulevard, Long Beach, CA 90840. E-mail: sbolkan@csulb.edu. Alan K. Goodboy (PhD, West Virginia University, 2007) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, 1128 McCormick Center, 400 E. 2nd Street, Bloomsburg, PA 17815. E-mail: agoodboy@bloomu.edu

the classroom as well (e.g., Harvey, Royal, & Stout, 2003; Pounder, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Walumbwa, Wu, & Ojode, 2004). Of particular interest to this study is one type of leadership known as *transformational leadership*.

Transformational leadership recognizes the transactional needs of "potential followers but tends to go further, seeking to arouse and satisfy higher needs, to engage the full person of the follower" (Bass, 1985, p. 14). Transformational leadership occurs when leaders get employees to accept the mission of the group and when they inspire and intellectually stimulate employees to be their best. Transformational leaders are, in essence, leaders who motivate subordinates to do more than they originally expected to do (Bass, 1985). Transformational leadership is a constellation of three components including charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. According to Bass, a person who is charismatic has insights into the needs and values of their followers, and has the ability to build on these needs and values to push people to reach their potential. Individualized consideration is a reflection of leadership behaviors that are considerate and supportive of subordinates. Finally, leaders who engage their followers in intellectual stimulation tend to force their subordinates to rethink old ways of doing things (Bass, 1985).

Research suggests that transformational leaders enjoy several benefits that non-transformational leaders do not. For example, transformational leaders enjoy a higher degree of trust from their subordinates (Holtz & Harold, 2008) and are able to stimulate both organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Erkutlu, 2008). Although the bulk of the research on transformational leadership has typically been concerned with business settings, the study of transformational leadership in the classroom has recently been explored as well. Several researchers have argued for the importance of teachers' leadership behavior in the classroom (e.g., Baba & Ace, 1989; Treslan, 2006). Specifically, Chory and McCroskey (1999) stated that it is appropriate to consider college classrooms as organizations, and mentioned that "viewing the teacher as the superior and students as subordinates, organizational concepts . . . should operate in the classroom in much the same way as they do in the workplace" (p. 2). In fact, recent research suggests that it does. As it relates to classroom behaviors, transformational leadership has recently been associated with students' exertion of extra classroom effort, perceptions of effective instruction, and students' levels of satisfaction with their instructors (Pounder, 2008a; Walumbwa et al., 2004); trust in the instructors, student involvement, and ratings of instructor performance (Harvey et al., 2003); and student participation, perceived instructor credibility, and student learning outcomes (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009).

Despite the fact that scholars have begun to study transformational leadership in the classroom, "there is a paucity of research examining the applicability of the transformational leadership notions to an instructional setting" (Pounder, 2003, p. 8). Although it is true that scholars have observed associations between ratings of transformational leadership and positive instructional outcomes, what is missing from the literature is an explanation and description of the behaviors teachers employ to communicate transformational leadership in their classrooms (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2009). That is, although several researchers suggest that the application of transformational leadership

can be beneficial in the classroom, we do not currently know what behaviors teachers should employ to be considered transformational. Therefore, we designed this study to ascertain students' perceptions of the behaviors associated with instructors' transformational leadership. To explore this notion, we offered the following research question:

> RQ1: What instructor behaviors do college students perceive as communicating transformational leadership (i.e., charisma, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation) in the college classroom?

Method

Participants

Participants were 166 undergraduate students (49 men and 117 women) enrolled in communication studies courses at a midsized Eastern university. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 36 years ($M = 19.75$, $SD = 2.05$).

Procedures

Participants were randomly provided with one of three versions of an open-ended survey. Each survey defined one of the three dimensions of transformational leadership based on Bass's (1985) operationalization of the construct.[1] After reading the explanation, participants provided three written narratives describing how their instructors had behaved or communicated in a way that reflected the description provided. Fifty-eight participants (13 men and 45 women) reported on charisma, 50 participants (15 men and 35 women) reported on individualized consideration, and 58 participants (21 men and 37 women) reported on intellectual stimulation.

Data Analysis

A content analysis was conducted based on the grounded theory approach to coding (Charmaz, 2000). Responses were open coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by two coders and, using a constant comparative approach, we modified existing categories to best reflect the data. We added new categories when the data did not fit an existing conceptual label. After initial categories were developed, we used axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to condense existing categories.

Results

Participants provided a total of 580 responses, with 245 examples for charisma, 168 for individualized consideration, and 167 for individualized consideration. Disagreements were resolved through discussion during the coding process, although 17 disagreements were not resolved. Therefore, inter-observer agreement was 97% between coders (Holsti, 1969).

Results from our content analysis indicate that students perceived instructors to be charismatic when they behaved in 10 ways. Students perceived their instructors were

Table 1 Behavioral Indicators of Transformational Leadership

%	Behavior	Description	Example
Charisma			
17	Confirmation	Showed interest in students; believed in students	"Never puts students down and always encouraged them that they can succeed and will succeed."
15	Enthusiasm	Used a variety of nonverbal immediacy behaviors	"Would get louder when trying to stress a point."
13	Humor	Humorous professors who made learning fun	"When professors joke around with their students, this puts the student at ease and makes it easier to learn."
12	Caring	Willing to help students with class needs and other needs as well; caring for students on a personal level	"A teacher who does not care will not inspire students."
7	Availability	Willing to meet students outside of class	The teacher was "available any time to help his students."
7	Content relevance	Showed how content was relevant to students' lives	The teacher tied topics to "real life situations."
6	Verbal immediacy	When instructors knew and used students' first names	"They know everyone's name."
6	Homphily	Appeared to be attitudinally similar to students	By using the occasional "bad word," the professor was able to talk to students as if he was one of the class.
6	Treated students as equals	Did not act superior to students in the class	"Talks to you at the same level, as opposed to down to you."
5	Self-disclosure	Telling personal stories that related to the subject matter	Shared "personal experiences related to topics being discussed in class."
Individualized Consideration			
29	Availability	Stressed office hours; willing to meet outside of office	"The appointment option helps students . . . in case the teacher's office hours are not at a good time."
18	Individual feedback	Provided specific, individual feedback	He held meetings for individual students "to talk with them about the class."
10	Verbal immediacy	Learned and used students' names in class	These professors "call on you in class by your name."

(*Continued*)

Table 1 Continued

%	Behavior	Description	Example
9	Personalized content	Allowed for student choice in class construction	Professors were willing to make "changes to the course" based on students' needs.
8	Conveying interest	Took an interest in students' personal lives	Students appreciated professors who "learn who their students are."
7	Special considerations	Helped students with special circumstances	"One teacher let me take a test after he [gave] it because I had a family emergency."
7	Remembering student history	Remembered students from previous interactions	Told a teacher about "an interview for a job, and when [I] had her again...she remembered."
6	Promoting participation	Created discussions and asked for individual input	Called on students "in class to engage them in discussions."
Intellectual Stimulation			
19	Interactive teaching style	Helped students learn in a novel manner	One professor "attempted to have the class try a 6 degrees of separation experiment...to show how we were all connected one way or another."
14	Challenging students	Challenged students to be their best through demanding but doable assignments, procedures, and thought processes	Challenged students to "support their beliefs with evidence."
14	Independent thought	Forced students to come to their own conclusions	Got students to "look into concepts and theories in a deeper way."
13	Promoting participation	Using group participation to facilitate student discussion	Class discussion allowed "different points of view and various levels of knowledge to be introduced."
12	Humor	Put students at ease with a fun, relaxed atmosphere	Students were excited about class because the material was not "dry."
11	Content relevance	Made course content relevant to students' lives	Connected lessons to "the real world and real life."

14

charismatic through (a) confirmation ($n = 42$), (b) enthusiasm ($n = 36$), (c) humor ($n = 31$), (d) caring ($n = 30$), (e) availability ($n = 16$), (f) content relevance ($n = 16$), (f) verbal immediacy ($n = 15$), (g) homophily ($n = 14$), (h) treating students as equals ($n = 14$), and (i) self-disclosure ($n = 13$). Eighteen ($n = 18$) responses did not fit any of the categories and were too disparate to form alternative groupings.

Individualized consideration was perceived by students to be a reflection of eight behaviors including availability ($n = 49$), providing individual feedback ($n = 30$), verbal immediacy ($n = 16$), personalized content ($n = 15$), conveying interest ($n = 14$), special considerations ($n = 11$), remembering student history ($n = 11$), and promoting participation ($n = 10$). Twelve responses did not fit the chosen categories, and could not be combined to form other groups.

Intellectual stimulation was communicated to students through a constellation of six behaviors including using an interactive teaching style ($n = 31$), challenging students ($n = 24$), encouraging independent thought ($n = 23$), promoting participation ($n = 22$), humor ($n = 20$), and content relevance ($n = 18$). Twenty-nine responses did not fit any of the categories, and were too disparate to form alternative groupings (see Table 1 for results).

Discussion

Many of the behavioral indicators that reflect transformational leadership in the classroom coincide with previous research on effective instruction. For instance, instructional researchers have already revealed the importance of behaviors such as immediacy, caring, credibility, and relevance in the classroom (e.g., Frymier & Shulman, 1995; McCroskey & Teven, 1999; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey; Teven, 2007). However, unique behaviors that have not received attention in instructional communication research also were revealed including remembering student history and providing individual feedback (reflecting individualized consideration), as well as challenging students and encouraging independent thought (reflecting intellectual stimulation). Therefore, it appears that students perceive the unique components of transformational leadership in the classroom as reflecting some behaviors that have been well-documented in instructional communication and some behaviors that have received scant attention.

Our results indicated that there are many similarities between the behaviors reported to reflect each component of transformational leadership. Charisma and individualized consideration shared a total of four behavioral clusters (out of 10 for charisma and eight for individualized consideration). Similarly, intellectual stimulation shared three (out of six) behavioral clusters with the other components (one with charisma, one with individualized consideration, and one with both). Regardless of what component of transformational leadership students were exposed to, students reported that they believed their instructors were behaving in a transformational fashion when they personalized the content of their courses and made their lessons relevant to students' realms of experience. This result is understandable in light of the definition of transformational leadership as a process of motivating

others by making them aware of the importance of organizational outcomes (Yukl, 1999).

In addition to personalized content, intellectual stimulation shared the behavioral cluster of humor with charisma and the cluster of promoting participation with individualized consideration. The link between humor and charisma makes sense considering the notion that teachers who are willing to laugh in class and have fun may be considered more dynamic and enlivening; both characteristics were defined by Bass (1985) to reflect charisma. Students also reported that teachers who promoted participation in groups tended to facilitate individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation. By sharing their opinions with other students and collaborating with each other, students reported that they had the opportunity to be exposed to a multitude of ideas and think of things in new ways. By facilitating classroom discussion, instructors were able to solicit feedback from individuals (individualized consideration) and promote intellectually stimulating conversations between students.

Finally, the components of charisma and individualized consideration shared a total of three behavioral clusters between them (not including personalized content). These behavioral clusters were verbal immediacy, availability, and caring for students/taking an interest in students' lives. Although these constructs make sense in their raw form and may lead to perceptions of individual consideration for students, it may be their ability to foster a relationship that helps students to perceive these behaviors as reflective of charismatic instructors as well.

In addition to their similarities, the behavioral clusters of each of the three components of transformational leadership had their differences. Intellectual stimulation had the behavioral clusters of teaching style, challenging students, and encouraging independent thought. These behaviors, in essence, reflect an instructor's ability to get students excited about learning and challenge them to assert themselves in the classroom in a fashion that promotes intellectual growth.

Individualized consideration differed from the other two components of transformational leadership in that it reflected instructors' ability to see students as individuals with particular needs and special personalities. Providing individual feedback, allowing for special considerations when students needed them, and remembering students' history all proved to be important behavioral clusters for this component.

Finally, charismatic leadership had several unique behavioral associations. These behaviors included the ability for teachers to confirm students' value, the expression of nonverbal immediacy, attitude homophily, the creation of a sense of equality between student and instructor, and self-disclosure. What each of these behaviors have in common is their ability to foster a positive and trusting relationship between instructors and students.

The main limitation of this study is that the results obtained may not be generalizable to every classroom, and may vary from culture to culture. Thus, future research should examine predictors of instructor transformational leadership in a quantitative investigation, and link leadership perceptions to classroom outcomes. In addition, research should compare instructor communication behaviors and predictors of transformational leadership in classrooms from different cultures.

Note

[1]   Version A (charisma) explained that ''some students have teachers they look up to and who have charisma. These teachers often inspire loyalty through their personalities and have the ability to make students feel good to be around them while at the same time commanding respect.'' Version B (individualized consideration) explained that ''some students have teachers who are good about giving individual attention to students. These teachers treat students as individuals and help them to develop in the manner best suited for each particular person in class.'' Version C (intellectual stimulation) explained that ''some teachers have the ability to get students to think of things in innovative and creative ways. These teachers stimulate intellectual thought and they do a good job of getting students to think of old problems in new ways.''

References

Baba, V. V. & Ace, M. E. (1989). Serendipity in leadership: Initiating structure and consideration in the college classroom. *Human Relations*, *42*, 509–525.

Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Bolkan, S. & Goodboy, A. K. (2009). Transformational leadership in the classroom: Fostering student learning, student participation, and teacher credibility. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, *36*, 296–306.

Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectionist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 509–535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Chory, R. M. & McCroskey, J. C. (1999). The relationship between teacher management communication style and affective learning. *Communication Quarterly*, *47*, 1–11.

Erkutlu, H. (2008). The impact of transformational leadership on organizational and leadership effectiveness: The Turkish case. *Journal of Management Development*, *27*, 708–726.

Frymier, A. B. & Shulman, G. M. (1995). ''What's in it for me?'': Increasing content relevance to enhance students' motivation. *Communication Education*, *44*, 40–50.

Harvey, S., Royal, M., & Stout, D. (2003). Instructor's transformational leadership: University student attitudes and ratings. *Psychological Reports*, *92*, 395–402.

Holsti, O. R. (1969). *Content analysis for the social sciences and humanities*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Holtz, B. C. & Harold, C. M. (2008). When your boss says no!: The effects of leadership style and trust on employee reactions to managerial explanations. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, *4*, 777–802.

McCroskey, J. C. & Teven, J. J. (1999). Goodwill: A reexamination of the construct and its measurement. *Communication Monographs*, *66*, 90–103.

Nussbaum, J. F. (1992). Effective teaching behaviors. *Communication Education*, *41*, 167–180.

Pounder, J. S. (2003). Employing transformational leadership to enhance the quality of management development instruction. *Journal of Management Development*, *22*, 6–13.

Pounder, J. S. (2006). Transformational classroom leadership: The fourth wave of teacher leadership? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *34*, 533–545.

Pounder, J. S. (2008a). Full-range classroom leadership: Implications for the cross-organizational and cross-cultural applicability of the transformational–transactional paradigm. *Leadership*, *4*, 115–135.

Pounder, J. S. (2008b). Transformational classroom leadership: A novel approach to evaluating classroom performance. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *33*, 233–243.

Richmond, V. P., Gorham, J. S., & McCroskey, J. C. (1987). The relationship between selected immediacy behaviors and cognitive learning. In M. McLaughlin (Ed.), *Communication yearbook* (Vol. 10, pp. 574–590). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques, procedures, and developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Teven, J. J. (2007). Teacher caring and classroom behavior: Relationships with student affect and perceptions of teacher competence and trustworthiness. *Communication Quarterly, 55*, 433–450.

Treslan, D. L. (2006). Transformational leadership in the classroom: Any evidence? *Education Canada, 46*, 58–62.

Walumbwa, F. O., Wu, C., & Ojode, L. A. (2004). Gender and instructional outcomes: The mediating role of leadership style. *Journal of Management Development, 23*, 124–140.

Yukl, G. (1999). An evaluation of conceptual weaknesses in transformational and charismatic leadership theories. *Leadership Quarterly, 10*, 285–305.