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BRIEF REPORT

Instructional Dissent as a Function of Student Conflict Styles

Alan K. Goodboy & San Bolkan

The purpose of this study was to examine how students' conflict styles (i.e., integrating, avoiding, dominating, obliging, and compromising) were related to the expression of instructional dissent (i.e., expressive, rhetorical, and vengeful). Participants were 160 undergraduate students, who completed a questionnaire measuring their conflict-handling communication with an instructor and how frequently they engaged in instructional dissent throughout the semester. Results of a canonical correlation revealed that (a) when students used the integrating, dominating, and compromising conflict styles, but did not use the avoiding style, they communicated more rhetorical dissent, and (b) when students used the dominating style, but not the integrating or obliging styles, they communicated more expressive, rhetorical, and vengeful dissent.

Keywords: Conflict Styles; Instructional Dissent; Student Dissent

Conflict is inevitable in college classrooms and, as Harrison (2007) noted, “nearly all educators have experienced conflict with a student” (p. 350). Classroom conflict arises over perceived issues such as unfair grades or exams, personality clashes, harassment, instructor incompetence, and instructor apathy, among other reasons (Boice, 1996; Harrison, 2007; Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn, & Gokee, 2002).

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College students have stylistic preferences for handling conflict. Sternberg and Soriano (1984) explained:

For whatever inconsistencies there may be in other domains of personal behavior it appears that individuals do have more and less preferred styles of conflict resolution, and that these styles reveal cross-situational consistencies across interpersonal, interorganizational, and international domains of conflict. (p. 125)

This study attempts to examine students' conflict styles in relation to their tendencies to communicate dissent in the instructional context.

Conflict Styles

Conflict styles refer to “people’s proclivity for using similar conflict tactics or strategies in different contexts, with different people, or across different times” (Cupach, Canary, & Spitzberg, 2010, p. 56). Research on conflict styles has originated from the work of Blake and Mouton (1964), who proposed a two-dimensional model of conflict where individuals approach conflict with (a) a concern for self and (b) a concern for others. Across these two dimensions, five styles of handling conflict have been conceptualized (Thomas, 1988), although researchers have used different conceptual labels for each style (Nicotera & Dorsey, 2006). According to Rahim and colleagues (Rahim, 1983; Rahim, Antonioni, & Psenicka, 2001), these five conflict styles include *integrating* (i.e., a high concern for self and others with a focus on reaching acceptable solutions for both parties), *dominating* (i.e., a high concern for self but low concern for others with a focus on winning the conflict episode), *compromising* (i.e., a moderate concern for self and others with a focus on giving up something to reach a mutual solution), *obliging* (i.e., a low concern for self but high concern for others with a focus on accommodating the needs of others), and *avoiding* (i.e., a low concern for self and others with a focus on not addressing the conflict). Goodboy (2011a) suggested that conflict styles may be an important preference that determines how students discuss class-related issues—specifically, as a “precursor to student dissent” (p. 437).

Instructional Dissent

Instructional dissent refers to students’ expressions of their disagreements or complaints related to classroom issues (Goodboy, 2011b). Goodboy (2011b) revealed that students tend to communicate three types of instructional dissent when their expectations are not met in the classroom: *expressive* dissent (i.e., venting frustrations and negative feelings to feel better), *rhetorical* dissent (i.e., trying to persuade the instructor to fix a perceived wrongdoing), and *vengeful* dissent (i.e., attempting to ruin an instructor’s reputation by spreading negative sponsorship). Although rhetorical dissent is directed toward the instructor, expressive and vengeful dissent can be communicated to anyone, but is typically communicated to classmates, friends, and family members (Goodboy, 2011b).

Because some of the triggering agents of instructional dissent (e.g., unfair grading and instructor incompetence) are the very same agents that cause conflict between

instructors and students, and even lead to formal university grievances (Harrison, 2007), students' conflict styles may have important bearings on how and why students express instructional dissent. Therefore, the following research question is offered:

RQ1: To what extent are students' conflict styles (i.e., integrating, avoiding, dominating, obliging, and compromising) related to the expression of instructional dissent (i.e., expressive, rhetorical, and vengeful)?

Method

Participants

Participants were 160 undergraduate students (52 men and 108 women) enrolled in a variety of lower- and upper-level communication courses at a Northeastern university and a Western university. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 42 years ($M = 20.80$, $SD = 2.88$).

Procedures and Instrumentation

Participants completed a survey consisting of two measures, in addition to providing demographic data. Using procedures developed by Zigarovich and Myers (2011), participants were provided a definition of *conflict* and were given several representative examples of conflict in the classroom. During the last 2 weeks of the semester, participants were asked to imagine they were having conflict with their instructor from the their previous class (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986), and then completed the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II; Rahim, 1983) to measure conflict styles and the Instructional Dissent Scale (IDS; Goodboy, 2012) to measure their dissent practices throughout the semester.

The ROCI-II is 28-items and uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Obtained Cronbach's alphas were as follows: integrating, $M = 28.58$, $SD = 4.73$ ($\alpha = .89$); avoiding, $M = 18.47$, $SD = 5.00$ ($\alpha = .82$); dominating, $M = 15.05$, $SD = 3.73$ ($\alpha = .82$); obliging, $M = 21.79$, $SD = 3.11$ ($\alpha = .76$); and compromising, $M = 14.81$, $SD = 2.37$ ($\alpha = .71$).

The IDS is 22-items and uses a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Obtained Cronbach's alphas were as follows: expressive, $M = 18.49$, $SD = 11.43$ ($\alpha = .96$); rhetorical, $M = 8.60$, $SD = 5.21$ ($\alpha = .84$); and vengeful, $M = 1.33$, $SD = 2.71$ ($\alpha = .86$).

Results

RQ1 inquired if students' conflict styles were related to their expressions of instructional dissent. Results of a canonical correlation revealed two significant roots (see Table 1). Only canonical correlates at the .30 level or above were examined (Lambert & Durand, 1975). The first root ($R_c = .45$) revealed that when students used the integrating, dominating, and compromising conflict styles, but not the avoiding style, they communicated more rhetorical dissent. The second root ($R_c = .36$) revealed that

Table 1 Canonical Correlation Analysis

Variable	Canonical loadings	
	R _{c1}	R _{c2}
Set 1: Student conflict styles		
Integrating	.71	-.61
Avoiding	-.77	-.14
Dominating	.51	.62
Obliging	-.02	-.33
Compromising	.59	-.16
Redundancy coefficient	.34	.18
Set 2: Instructional dissent		
Expressive	-.20	.80
Rhetorical	.89	.44
Vengeful	-.15	.81
Redundancy coefficient	.06	.06

Note. Wilks's $\Lambda = .68$; $F(15, 414.49) = 4.21$, $p < .001$.

when students used the dominating style, but not the integrating or obliging styles, they communicated more expressive, rhetorical, and vengeful dissent altogether.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between students' conflict styles and their use of instructional dissent. Two major findings were discovered. First, students who used an integrating, dominating, and compromising style, and did not avoid conflict, communicated more rhetorical dissent. These three styles have a concern for self in common.

Students who were concerned with themselves (in this case, concerned with performing well in the course) felt it was more necessary to approach an instructor directly to dissent about their class-related concerns. As Goodboy (2011b) noted, "rhetorical dissent is used for the sole purpose of seeking change and persuading the instructor to correct a perceived wrongdoing" (p. 308), and results from this study seem to bear this conclusion out. Given the high concern for self that is inherent in these three styles, it is no surprise that students are more likely to approach an instructor and attempt to negotiate a remedy or resolution to the perceived problem. However, the integrating and compromising styles also communicate a concern for others (in this case, the instructor). This result also makes sense given that research suggests rhetorical dissent is not necessarily a negative form of communication (Goodboy, 2011a; Goodboy & Myers, 2012).

Second, students who used a dominating style, but did not use integrating or obliging styles, communicated all three types of dissent. This finding suggests that students who only have a high concern for the self, and have no concern for others (in this case,

the instructor), engage in dissent designed to rectify perceived classroom problems, but also to vent classroom frustrations and inflict harm to the instructor's reputation and image. Students with a concern only for themselves appear to communicate more negative messages about their classroom experiences, in general, which may not help resolve their needs as effectively as students who engage in rhetorical dissent alone.

Given these findings, future research should continue to distinguish between how much of instructional dissent is explained by classroom issues versus communication variables not tied to a specific class or instructor (e.g., educational beliefs, indoctrinated family values, and personality). Overall, this study supports the notion that instructional dissent is motivated by a student's high concern for self, and is stylistically communicated during perceived conflict.

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