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“Reaching Out” After Class:

**A Call for Research Examining Out-of-Class Contact with
Students in Post-Secondary Education**

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Abstract

The present paper is a call for additional research about out-of-class contact with students. Out-of-class contact is defined as communication between instructor and student(s) that occurs outside of the normal class meeting time (e.g., office hours, phone call, email; Legg & Wilson, 2009). Out-of-class contact typically provides both feedback about student performance and the development of instructor-student rapport. While there are several benefits of establishing out-of-class contact with students, many unanswered questions remain. For instance, researchers need to examine what is typical of out-of-class instructor-student contact, the mechanisms, or mediators, through which contact benefits students, as well as investigating the dark side of outside-of-class contact. Although we discuss multiple chasms in the research, added emphasis is placed upon identifying the mediators of the out-of-class contact-improved student performance relationship. This paper seeks to stimulate more methodologically sound research on this topic.

There are many benefits to "reaching out" to students through out-of-class contact. This contact is defined as a communication between the instructor and students outside the class and may take several forms such as, office hours, a phone call, or an email (Legg & Wilson, 2009). Instructors may want to promote out-of-class contact with students because it leads to better classroom performance, as students exhibit increased motivation, participation, and improved grades following contact (Buskist & Saville, 2001, 2004; Legg & Wilson, 2009; Waters, Kemp, & Pucci, 1988). Despite the benefits of out-of-class contact, several questions remain. For instance, to what extent are instructors already engaged in out-of-class contact with students? What are the mediators (mechanisms explicating a relationship between an independent and dependent variable) of the out-of-class contact-improved student performance relationship? Are certain forms of contact more beneficial than others (i.e., contact providing feedback about student performance versus contact establishing a rapport with students)? Are there any disadvantages to out-of-class contact with students? Once these questions are answered, instructors will be better equipped to utilize out-of-class contact with students to their benefit, adapting it to their individual teaching style and course goals as well as to the learning style of their students. The current paper is a call for research on out-of-class contact with students in a post-secondary educational setting.

Out-of-class contact with students has become increasingly convenient due to advances in technology. Most universities provide teaching platforms such as Blackboard, WebCT, or E-College, which foster secure and confidential out-of-class communication with students (Gross-Lucas & Bernstein, 2005). These teaching platforms come equipped

with forums and discussion boards providing additional modes of out-of-class contact (Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005; Legg & Wilson, 2009). Furthermore, today's college students want technology to be used to provide them with more personalized out-of-class contact with their instructors (Price, 2009). Due to the increased demand by students for individuated attention, schools may actively promote personalized experiences with instructors to potential students as a recruitment tool.

Past research has identified a positive correlation between amount of out-of-class contact with students and overall course satisfaction (Aylor & Opplinger, 2003). It has also been demonstrated that out-of-class contact from instructors improves student performance (Buskist & Saville, 2001; 2004). A lack of contact with the instructor has been cited as a primary detractor of student learning (Wulff, Nyquist, & Abbott, 1987). Despite these findings, there are several large gaps within the literature on out-of-class contact. These gaps center around how much and what types of contact impact student performance. Some examples are as follows: the typical level of out-of-class contact is yet to be determined, the mediators between the out-of-class contact-improved student performance relationship have yet to be extrapolated, the dark sides of contact have yet to be identified, and the long-term effects of out-of-class contact on student performance has not been investigated. Although we discuss multiple holes in the research, our main focus is upon determining the mediators, or mechanisms, behind that contact leading to improved student performance.

Amount of Out-of-Class Contact

In order to move forward in this research area, researchers first need to examine the current state of out-of-class contact in post-secondary education. The typical research

paper about out-of-class contact involves a manipulation of amount of out-of-class contact students receive, through an email or phone call, then an appraisal of its effect on student performance (Isbell & Cote, 2009; Legg & Wilson, 2009). However, there is no research showing what is typical of out-of-class contact. For instance, survey research needs to demonstrate the *amount* of out-of-class contact instructors presently have with their students. This research needs to determine the *goals* instructors have when they establish out-of-class contact. In addition, research should also examine whether instructors view out-of-class contact as beneficial. While experimental manipulations are valuable, out-of-class contact also warrants qualitative research (e.g., interviews and analytic autoethnography; Anderson, 2006). It also may be important to determine an optimal amount of out-of-class contact for improved student performance. This would ensure that the instructor institutes an adequate amount of out-of-class contact to influence student performance in a positive way, without detracting from the course goals.

Potential Mediators of Contact

As it stands today, there is a major flaw in the research on out-of-class contact with students. Research shows that as out-of-class contact increases, there is an improvement in student performance. However, it is important to examine the mediators (third variables or mechanisms explicating a relationship between an independent and dependent variable) between out-of-class contact and student performance. A review of the literature has indicated two potential mediators of the contact-student performance relationship: feedback and rapport. Out-of-class contact involves both performance feedback and rapport development (Aylor & Opplinger, 2003; Buskist & Saville, 2001; 2004). However, it is important to distinguish their separate effects on student

performance. For instance, increased out-of-class contact with the instructor may lead to improved rapport, which leads to improved performance, or it may be that out-of-class contact means that students will receive more feedback, which motivates them to improve their class performance. It is also important to examine any potential interaction effects (e.g., it may be that only when feedback and rapport development occur together that out-of-class contact leads to improved student performance). While other variables (e.g., classroom and instructor demographics) may impact the out-of-class contact-improved performance relationship, for the purpose of this paper, we chose to focus on two potential mediators of this relationship. At this point it is relevant to include a review of recent research on instructor-student rapport as well as feedback as they are related to student performance.

Instructor-Student Rapport. Instructor-student rapport is defined as an emotional bond between teacher and student (Buskist & Saville, 2001, 2004). Kipp and Wilson (2006) report that making a personal connection with students is one of the primary challenges facing college professors. Research by Price (2009) on millennial college students—students born between 1981 and 1999—has shown that the ‘ideal’ characteristic of instructors is to be approachable and to interact with their students. It appears that millennial students are “more willing to pursue learning outcomes when we connect with them on a personal level” (Price, 2009, p. 5). Studies looking at the effects of rapport development have shown that a rise in rapport leads to increased student motivation, participation and learning (Buskist & Saville, 2001, 2004; Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Frymier, 1994; Wilson & Wilson, 2007). Perhaps this is caused by an increased sense of student accountability due to their improved relationship with their

instructor. Given these findings, it is not surprising that increasing instructor-student rapport leads to improved student performance.

In courses where students feel they do not have rapport with the instructor, they report low satisfaction with the class (Scheck, Kinicki, & Webster, 1994). Common negative reactions from students involve a lack of interaction with faculty members (Cooper & Robinson, 2000). Students who reported heightened depersonalization (e.g., perceived anonymity) perhaps due to insufficient contact and instructor-student rapport, also reported lessened individual accountability (Wulff, et al., 1987).

Feedback. Instructor contact in the form of feedback about class performance has been shown to be an important motivating factor for students to pursue academic goals (Covington & Omelich, 1984). Feedback helps students by providing information about how they are progressing in the class as well as ways in which they can improve (Williams & Kane, 2009). In addition, feedback has been shown to be effective when it consists of information about progress, and/or about how to proceed in a course (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It has also been found that providing specific and clear feedback, which is directly linked to attainment of goals, can reduce impediments to student learning and performance (such as frustration resulting from ambiguous feedback; Moreno, 2004).

Given this review, it makes sense that rapport, feedback, or an interaction of both lead to increased student performance following out-of-class contact with an instructor. It is important to determine whether rapport and feedback have separate effects or an interaction effect so the effectiveness of the different methods in improving student performance can be extrapolated. For example, determining the relative importance of

rapport and feedback in out-of-class contact will impact the manner in which instructors conduct office hours and phrase emails to students. Questions such as these have yet to be explored within the literature regarding out-of-class contact. Below are additional areas of out-of-class contact that warrant further speculation. However, it is important to note that we believe determining the mediators between out-of-class contact and improved student performance to be one of the most interesting problems at this point in time.

The Dark Side of Out-of-Class Contact

Although out-of-class contact with students is touted as a positive thing (Buskist & Saville, 2001, 2004; Legg & Wilson, 2009), there may be a “dark side” to out-of-class contact. While there are several potential downsides to out-of-class contact, we focus upon student performance issues, specifically, the development of multiple roles, and time management problems. For some instructors, the idea of initiating out-of-class contact with students leaves them with the uneasy feeling of over-stepping their professional boundaries. Keith-Spiegel (2004) writes that uncontrolled out-of-class contact with students may lead to a phenomenon called ‘multiple roles,’ where a professor is viewed both as an instructor and as a friend. This is problematic as the instructor-student power-differential is not eliminated by out-of-class contact. It is important that in establishing out-of-class contact with students, students do not lose respect for the professional boundaries with their instructors. Keith-Spiegel (2004) specifies the boundary between a friend and an instructor in saying that, as an instructor, it is inappropriate to counsel students on non-academic matters or to share gossip about other students or faculty members. Out-of-class contact with students (e.g., via email, chatting, texting, Blackboard) can also have detrimental consequences to instructors from

a time management perspective. In the University setting, instructors have to balance multiple responsibilities (e.g., teaching, mentoring, research, administrative, professional service). It is possible that out-of-class contact with students could easily become a time-intensive activity that takes focus away from other important responsibilities.

We believe that once one has determined the mediators between out-of-class contact and student performance, one can better test for negative effects of out-of-class contact. For instance, if research shows that feedback is the mechanism between contact and improved student performance, perhaps decreasing rapport development may resolve multiple roles problems. It is important that future research examine the "dark side" to out-of-class contact with students.

Beyond the Classroom

We believe that the benefits of out-of-class contact extend beyond the outcomes tested in prior research, that is, beyond the scope of a single course's student grades, motivation, and participation (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Frymier, 1994; Wilson & Wilson, 2007). We believe that out-of-class contact with an instructor can set the foundation for a career-mentoring relationship with students. In addition, one may examine the relationship between out-of-class contact and outcome variables obtained upon graduation, such as student attitudes toward the instructor, satisfaction with the department, and sentiment regarding career plans following graduation. This information would be particularly helpful in determining what aspects of contact were most beneficial (e.g., feedback, rapport, both), what aspects of contact need further improvement, and what changes overall may lead to a more rewarding experience within the department.

Conclusion

Existing literature demonstrates the importance of out-of-class contact on student performance, yet there are still several chasms in this area of research. In this paper, we pose a call for research examining out-of-class contact with students in post-secondary education. We discuss gaps in the literature that we see as particularly interesting, specifically, an analysis of the amount of out-of-class contact that instructors engage in, an examination of the mediators behind the contact-student performance relationship, the dark side of out-of-class contact, as well as long term effects of such contact. We also suggest future research ideas in this paper. To establish a baseline of out-of-class contact behaviors, we believe it would be useful to conduct a survey of instructors to determine how much out-of-class contact instructors presently have with their students, the goals instructors have when they establish out-of-class contact, and whether instructors view time spent on out-of-class contact as beneficial in comparison to time spent on other work responsibilities. It may also be worthwhile for future research to examine how demographics of the class (e.g., class size, course difficulty, average student age) and demographics of the instructor may impact the out-of-class contact-improved student performance relationship.

Although we discuss multiple gaps in the research, our main focus is upon potential mediators of the out-of-class contact-improved student performance relationship. We propose two potential mediators of this relationship: feedback and instructor-student rapport. If one can examine the main effects and interaction effects of rapport and feedback on student performance, it may impact the way that instructors structure office hours, phrase emails, and utilize technology in their courses. This way, instructors can be

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more intentional about the content, delivery method, and time spent on out-of-class contact with students in order to maximize positive effects of contact on student performance, while minimizing any potential negative effects. In closing, this paper seeks to stimulate methodologically sound research on some of these interesting gaps in the research on out-of-class contact with students.

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