Fear in the Classroom: An Examination of Teachers’ Use of Fear Appeals and Students’ Learning Outcomes

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This study examined the impact of teachers’ use of fear appeals and efficacy statements on student affective learning, motivation, likelihood of taking a course with the instructor, and likelihood of visiting with the instructor for help. The results suggest that fear and efficacy interact to more positively influence students’ perceptions of these variables compared to the use of fear alone. Pedagogical implications as well as suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Fear Appeals; Behavior Alteration Techniques; Persuasion; Extended Parallel Process Model

Over the last 20 years, a number of studies have examined the techniques teachers use to gain compliance from students. In one significant line of research, scholars developed a typology of compliance-gaining strategies known as behavior-alteration techniques (BATs) (Kearney & Plax, 1987; Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond, 1990; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond & Roach, 1992). Extant research demonstrates that a negative relationship exists between antisocial BATs and important learning outcomes such as student motivation and affective learning (Richmond, 1990; Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Richmond & Roach, 1992). However, a paucity of research exists regarding teachers’ use of fear appeals, which are considered to be an antisocial technique. In particular, researchers have not examined the use of antisocial (e.g., fear appeals) and prosocial (e.g., efficacy
Teachers’ use of fear represents an important classroom communication issue. Teachers may decide to use fear appeals to demonstrate the negative consequences students may face if they fail to comply with the teacher’s request or desired behavior change. For example, in almost any classroom, an observer might hear, “I am going to give you an F on this speech if you plagiarize.” Although previous instructional communication scholars have argued that the use of fear negatively influences student outcomes, research on the use of fear in other contexts (e.g., health communication) generally suggests that fear can be utilized successfully to change attitudes and behavior. Specifically, research suggests that threatening messages are likely to be most successful when accompanied by a statement that the target can successfully take action to avoid the threat (i.e., an efficacy statement). Importantly, instructional communication scholars have failed to investigate teachers’ use of fear and efficacy together. When combined with efficacy statements, fear appeals may actually be useful in helping students achieve educational objectives. The purpose of this study is to determine the effect fear appeals and efficacy statements have on student outcomes. The compliance-gaining literature offers a foundation for better understanding the use of fear in the classroom.

Compliance-Gaining in the Classroom

While compliance-gaining research has explored a number of relevant variables, an appreciation of power is especially important for understanding compliance-gaining in the classroom. In the context of classroom communication, power refers to the ability of one individual to influence another to do something they would not have done had they not been influenced (Kearney et al., 1984). According to Richmond and Roach (1992), power exists and can be created in relationships. In other words, power exists in all relationships, regardless of whether it is shared power among equals or one person having power over another (e.g., a superior/subordinate relationship). In addition, power and communication are inextricably linked insofar as individuals assert their power through communication (Richmond & Roach, 1992). For example, a teacher exerts power through messages designed to change the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of a student. Further, as Richmond and Roach (1992) note, teachers’ daily classroom management activities depend on power, such as giving assignment directions, keeping students on task, and motivating them to participate in instructional activities.

Scholars who examine compliance-gaining in the context of the classroom are generally concerned with the tactics teachers use to keep students on task, as well as to correct and prevent misbehaviors. Teacher compliance-gaining efforts are related to a number of student outcomes. Effective classroom management stimulates substantial student involvement in classroom activities, minimizes student behaviors that interfere with classroom work, and makes efficient use of instructional time.
In other words, effective classroom management is essential to overall teaching effectiveness and student learning (Emmer & Evertson, 1981; Plax & Kearney, 1990).

Compliance-gaining strategies studied in the instructional context are based on French and Raven’s (1960) five bases of power. According to Kearney et al. (1984), coercive power emanates from students’ perceptions that they will be punished by the teacher if they fail to comply with the teacher’s influence attempts. Reward power stems from students’ perceptions that they will be rewarded if they comply with teacher demands. Legitimate power is based upon students’ perceptions that the teacher has the right to prescribe behavior. Referent power is based on students’ desire to comply in order to please or identify with the teacher. Finally, expert power arises from students’ desire to comply because they perceive that the teacher is competent in specific areas. Teachers use these bases of power as a foundation for the specific behavior alteration strategies they employ in the classroom.

The early studies of power by Kearney et al. (1984) and Kearney, Plax, Richmond, and McCroskey (1985) resulted in the creation of 22 BATs rooted in the five types of power. BATs are divided into two categories: prosocial and antisocial. Messages that delineate and express positive consequences for being on task are prosocial. These techniques are reward-based and encouraging in nature. Prosocial BATs are grounded in expert and referent power (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). Richmond and Roach (1992) state that BATs based on referent power are intended to gain compliance and also serve to build a positive relationship between the teacher and student. The statement, “If you do this, I will be proud of you,” is an example of a prosocial BAT based on referent power. BATs based in expert power appeal to students’ desire to show respect for, or acknowledge, a teacher’s status, level of knowledge, training, and expertise (Richmond & Roach, 1992). The phrase, “I’ve done this before, and in my experience it always works,” is an example of a prosocial BAT based on expert power. As this example illustrates, such prosocial BATs may explicitly address the efficacy of the recommended behavior.

Antisocial BATs are punishment-based and delineate the negative outcomes of misbehavior and/or off-task behavior (Kearney, Plax, & Burroughs, 1991). Antisocial messages tend to encourage competitiveness, exclude students, and undermine their self-esteem (Kearney et al., 1991). Antisocial BATs are based in coercive and legitimate power (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984). According to Richmond and Roach (1992), BATs derived from coercive power are characterized by threats of punishment directed toward students. “You are going to fail the test,” is an example of this type of BAT. BATs based in legitimate power rely on the teacher’s authority and might be expressed as, “I am the teacher and you have to do what I say” (see Kearney et al., 1984 for additional examples).

McCroskey, Richmond, Plax, and Kearney (1985) and Richmond and McCroskey (1984) found that teachers’ use of BATs based in coercive and legitimate power decreased student cognitive and affective learning. Richmond and Roach (1992) argue that this finding is not surprising due to the oppressive nature of such strategies. Coercive strategies threaten punishment for students. For example, a teacher might say, “I am going to send you to the principle’s office,” or “I am going to
fail you for the course.” Legitimate power strategies, then, are based on statements such as the following: “Do this because I said so” or “Do this because I’m the teacher.” Instructional communication scholars have also found a negative relationship between coercive BATs and student motivation to learn (Richmond, 1990; Richmond & Roach, 1992). In short, previous research indicates that antisocial compliance-gaining strategies tend to lower students’ cognitive learning and cause them to have negative feelings toward the teacher, the course, and the content/subject matter in general (Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1986; Richmond, McCroskey, Kearney, & Plax, 1987; Richmond & Roach, 1992).

The use of fear or threats to control student behaviors is based in both coercive and legitimate power. As an antisocial BAT, fear appeals should be less than optimal as an effective control strategy. However, instructional communication scholars have yet to examine how teachers who may use fear might follow up with help or advice to students about how to avoid the consequences associated with the threats. In other words, these power researchers have not examined how antisocial and prosocial strategies (e.g., fear and efficacy respectively) might work in combination to effectively influence student behavior. Perhaps prosocial strategies, such as efficacy statements, could be used in tandem with antisocial strategies to mitigate the negative effects of these BATs. An examination of the fear appeal literature in noninstructional contexts indicates that measuring fear and student reactions to fear-based compliance-gaining strategies in isolation is problematic on theoretical grounds.

Fear Appeals

Since Aristotle’s time, many scholars have attempted to operationalize fear and understand how fear appeals work to motivate individuals. According to Witte (1992), fear appeals arouse fear by depicting a personally relevant and significant threat, and then following this description of the threat by outlining recommendations presented as feasible options for avoiding the threat. As this definition implies, the two key constructs in fear appeal research are perceived threat and perceived efficacy (Witte, 1994; Witte & Allen, 2000). Witte and Allen (2000) note that perceived threat is made up of two components: perceived susceptibility and perceived severity. The first, perceived susceptibility, is the degree to which a person feels they are likely to experience the threat. The second component, perceived severity of the threat, refers to the extent to which an individual feels they will be harmed if the threat is realized.

On the other hand, perceived efficacy refers to the steps or behaviors presented in a message to avoid a threat (Morman, 2000). Perceived efficacy has two dimensions as well. Perceived response efficacy refers to whether or not a person believes the recommended behavior or response will prevent the threat (Rogers, 1975, 1983). Perceived self-efficacy refers to whether or not an individual believes they can perform the recommended response (Rogers, 1975, 1983).
The Extended Parallel Process Model (EPPM) offers a valuable framework for understanding how fear appeals work. The EPPM is most often applied to health research (Mormon, 2000; Witte, 1994); however, this model has much to offer instructional communication scholars. According to Mormon (2000), the EPPM posits that:

When a message creates a high perceived threat but the perceived response efficacy remains low, fear control processes are engaged and will dominate a person's behavior, resulting in message rejection, denial, or minimization. However, when a message creates high perceived threat and the perceived response efficacy is also high, danger control processes are engaged and will dominate a person's behavior resulting in message acceptance and attitude, intention, and behavioral changes. (p. 95)

Based upon the EPPM, it is reasonable to suggest that fear appeals that threaten students without an efficacy statement are likely to engender an extremely negative response. This has certainly been the case in previous compliance-gaining research. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis of fear appeals indicates that the most persuasive messages are both high threat/high efficacy (HTHE), followed by high threat/low efficacy (HTLE), low threat/high efficacy (LTHE), and low threat/low efficacy (LTLE) messages (Witte & Allen, 2000).

Following the EPPM, if teachers threaten students without providing a means to correct or change the desired behavior, students will likely respond negatively. Without any means for change, students may become frustrated and even angry largely because they do not know how to avoid the threat on their own. As a result, this compliance-gaining strategy will likely negatively influence students' motivation and affect, causing them to hold negative feelings toward the teacher, course, and subject matter in general (see McCroskey et al., 1985 and Richmond & Roach, 1992 for more on the relationship between antisocial BATS and student affect and motivation). The use of fear alone is also likely to negatively influence behavioral outcomes such as students' likelihood of taking another course with the instructor or even visiting with the instructor outside of class for additional help with the course. In contrast, teachers who couple threats with efficacy statements, such as offering to show students how to avoid negative consequences and succeed, might find the two work in combination as an effective compliance-gaining strategy. In other words, consistent with the EPPM, fear and efficacy likely interact to positively influence students' perceptions. To test for interaction effects, the following hypothesis was advanced:

**H1a:** The instructor's use of fear and efficacy will interact to positively influence students' self-perceived state motivation such that the use of fear and efficacy together will produce a higher motivation than the use of fear alone.

**H1b:** The instructor's use of fear and efficacy will interact to positively influence students' self-perceived affective learning such that the use of fear and efficacy together will produce a higher affect than the use of fear alone.

**H1c:** The instructor's use of efficacy will interact to positively influence students' likelihood of taking another course with the instructor such that the use of fear
and efficacy together will produce a greater likelihood of taking another course than the use of fear alone.

H1d: The instructor’s use of fear and efficacy will interact to positively influence students’ likelihood of visiting with the instructor such that the use of fear and efficacy together will produce a greater likelihood of visiting with the instructor than the use of fear alone.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 226 undergraduate students (197 first-year students, 14 sophomores, 9 juniors, 6 seniors) enrolled in 12 sections of the basic communication course at a medium-sized Midwestern university. The sample consisted of 102 males and 124 females, with an average age of 18.96 (ranging from 18 to 25 years). The racial/ethnic distribution of the sample was 82.3% Caucasian, 11.1% African American, 2.2% Asian Pacific Islander, 2.2% Bi-racial/mixed, .9% Latino/Latina, and .4% Native American.

Manipulation

In this study, fear appeals (present vs. absent) and efficacy statements (present vs. absent) were manipulated in a $2 \times 2$ factorial design. Participants were administered one of four versions of the survey based on this design (see Figure 1). The conditions were manipulated in the form of hypothetical scenarios. For each scenario, participants were told to imagine they had just given an informative speech in their class and were receiving feedback from the instructor. This set-up was chosen for two reasons: First, the context is one in which fear would be realistically used, and second, participants had just completed the informative speech in their basic communication course (COM 110), making the experience salient to them.

The fear appeals were derived from and rooted in the Kearney et al. (1984) BAT typology. Specifically, they included threats surrounding the participant’s current situation: poor grades in the course, negative appraisal by others, and future negative consequences, such as loss of financial aid or scholarship or disqualification from internships or jobs in the future. Basing the fear appeal in simulated speech feedback allowed the researchers to maximize both perceived susceptibility and perceived severity of the threat. In other words, we reasoned that students would be highly susceptible to the repercussions of poor speech performance, and students could reasonably imagine the severe consequences of poor performance. Similarly, the efficacy statements were designed to reflect both perceived response efficacy (working with the instructor before future assignments is a sure way to ensure success) and perceived self-efficacy (if you put forth the required effort, you can improve your grade on the next speech).
Measures

State motivation. Christophel’s (1990) measure of student state motivation was used to operationalize motivation. This measure is composed of 12 bipolar items with seven response options. For each bipolar adjective pair, participants were asked to circle a number from one to seven that best represented their perceptions of the class they evaluated. The total score obtained by summing scores for the 12 items was used in the analyses reported below. Alpha reliability for the 12-item measure was estimated at .93.

Affective learning. Andersen’s (1979) measure of affective learning was used to operationalize learning. This instrument is designed to assess students’ attitudes toward course content, the behaviors recommended in the class, the instructor and the likelihood of completing additional or related course work, the likelihood of performing the behaviors taught in the class, and the likelihood of taking another course with the instructor. For each of the areas evaluated, participants responded to four bipolar scales with seven response options. The following coefficient alphas were obtained for each of the five subscales: attitude about content, .94; attitude about behaviors recommended, .95; attitude about instructor,
.95; likelihood of engaging in recommended behaviors, .94; and likelihood of enrolling in a similar course, .96. The overall coefficient alpha for the affective learning measure was .96.

Likelihood of taking a course and visiting with the instructor. In order to assess the influence of the teacher’s compliance-gaining strategies on students’ behavioral intentions, the researchers created items to measure their likelihood of taking a course and visiting with the teacher described in the scenario. Respondents were asked to rate their likelihood of behaviors on a 7-point bipolar scale using these anchors: likely–unlikely, impossible–possible, probable–improbable, and would–would not. The coefficient alphas for likelihood of enrolling in another course with the same instructor and likelihood of visiting with the instructor before the next speech were .98 and .97, respectively.

The survey also contained manipulation check items to assess students’ perceptions of the instructor’s use of fear and efficacy in the scenarios. Respondents were asked to evaluate the extent to which they perceived the instructor’s message to use fear to motivate them to improve their grade on two 7-point bipolar scales using these anchors: the message used a a great deal of fear–the message used no fear at all, and the message was frightening–the message was not frightening. Similarly, respondents were asked to evaluate whether the instructor offered comments that would help them prepare for the next speech on two, 7-point bipolar scales using these anchors: the instructor was very helpful–the instructor was not helpful at all, and the instructor’s suggestions will make it easy for me to improve–the instructor’s suggestions will make it very difficult for me to improve.

Results

Manipulation Checks

Two separate ANOVA procedures were calculated to determine whether or not the manipulation of fear and efficacy was valid. The first ANOVA tested mean differences in students’ perceptions of the teacher’s use of fear between the groups. A significant main effect for the fear variable did emerge, $F(1, 224) = 86.14, p < .05, \eta^2 = .28$. Students exposed to the scenarios employing fear ($M = 5.41, SD = 1.53$) rated those scenarios significantly higher in perceived fear than the students not exposed to the fear scenarios ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.79$). The second ANOVA was calculated to assess the manipulation of the efficacy factor. A significant main effect for the efficacy factor emerged, $F(1, 224) = 243.43, p < .05, \eta^2 = .52$. Students exposed to the scenarios containing an efficacy statement ($M = 5.57, SD = 1.42$) rated those statements as significantly more efficacious compared to the students not exposed to explicit efficacy messages ($M = 2.55, SD = 1.49$). Collectively, these findings provide evidence that the manipulation of the fear and efficacy factors was successful.
The hypothesis posited that the interaction of fear and efficacy would result in higher means for the dependent variables than either acting in isolation (H1a, H1d). In terms of student state motivation, the results of the factorial ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect, $F(3, 216) = 32.27, p < .05, \eta^2 = .31$. Cell comparisons using Tukey follow-up procedures revealed that the efficacy messages ($M = 4.17, SD = .88$) produced significantly higher levels of state motivation than messages containing both fear and efficacy ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.08$), messages that only contained fear appeals ($M = 3.50, SD = 1.15$), and messages that contained neither fear nor efficacy ($M = 3.51, SD = 1.08$). In support of H1a, the instructor’s use of fear and efficacy together produced significantly higher levels of motivation than the use of fear alone. Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations for each condition.

In terms of student affective learning, the results of the factorial ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect, $F(3, 222) = 46.01, p < .05, \eta^2 = .38$. Cell comparisons using Tukey follow-up procedures revealed that the efficacy messages ($M = 5.66, SD = .95$) produced significantly higher levels of affective learning than messages containing both fear and efficacy ($M = 4.56, SD = 1.34$), messages that only contained fear appeals ($M = 3.24, SD = 1.21$), and messages that contained neither fear nor efficacy ($M = 3.70, SD = 1.17$). In support of H1b, the instructor’s use of fear and efficacy together produced significantly higher levels of affective learning than the use of fear alone.

The results of the factorial ANOVA also revealed a significant interaction effect for students’ likelihood of taking another course with the instructor described in this scenario, $F(3, 222) = 51.22, p < .05, \eta^2 = .41$. Cell comparisons using Tukey follow-up procedures revealed that the students were significantly more likely to indicate that they would take another course with the instructor when the instructor employed efficacy messages ($M = 5.59, SD = 1.52$) compared to messages containing both fear and efficacy ($M = 3.99, SD = 2.05$), messages that only contained fear

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| State motivation | $M = 5.17$ | $M = 4.47$ | $M = 3.50$ | $M = 3.51$
|             | $SD = .88$ | $SD = 1.08$ | $SD = 1.15$ | $SD = 1.08$
|             | $n = 54$ | $n = 55$ | $n = 56$ | $n = 55$
| Affective learning | $M = 5.66$ | $M = 4.56$ | $M = 3.24$ | $M = 3.70$
|             | $SD = .95$ | $SD = 1.34$ | $SD = 1.21$ | $SD = 1.17$
|             | $n = 56$ | $n = 56$ | $n = 57$ | $n = 57$
| Take a course with instructor | $M = 5.59$ | $M = 3.99$ | $M = 1.95$ | $M = 2.74$
|             | $SD = 1.52$ | $SD = 2.05$ | $SD = 1.42$ | $SD = 1.61$
|             | $n = 56$ | $n = 56$ | $n = 57$ | $n = 57$
| Visit instructor prior to next speech | $M = 5.89$ | $M = 5.47$ | $M = 4.16$ | $M = 4.69$
|             | $SD = 1.26$ | $SD = 1.64$ | $SD = 2.16$ | $SD = 1.83$
|             | $n = 56$ | $n = 56$ | $n = 56$ | $n = 57$
appeals ($M = 1.95, SD = 1.42$), and messages that contained neither fear nor efficacy ($M = 2.74, SD = 1.61$). In support of H1c, students reported being significantly more likely to take another course with the instructor when the instructor used fear and efficacy together compared to the use of fear alone.

Finally, the results of the factorial ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect for students’ likelihood of visiting with the instructor described in this scenario prior to the next speech, $F(3, 221) = 10.98, p < .05, \eta^2 = .13$. Cell comparisons using Tukey follow-up procedures revealed that the students were significantly more likely to indicate that they would visit with the instructor prior to the next speech when the instructor employed efficacy messages ($M = 5.89, SD = 1.26$) compared to messages containing both fear and efficacy ($M = 5.47, SD = 1.64$), messages that only contained fear appeals ($M = 4.16, SD = 2.16$), and messages that contained neither fear nor efficacy ($M = 4.69, SD = 1.83$). In support of H1d, students also reported being significantly more likely to visit with instructor prior to the next speech when the instructor used fear and efficacy together compared to the use of fear alone.

**Discussion**

This research sought to address a gap in the way instructional communication scholars approach teachers’ use of threats as a compliance-gaining strategy. Specifically, scholars have examined messages that advance a threat to students without an efficacy statement. Importantly, a substantial body of literature in health communication suggests that receivers reject messages that create a high threat when perceived efficacy is low (Witte & Allen, 2000; Witte, Berkowitz, Cameron, & McKeon, 1998). This may explain why scholars in instruction have consistently found a negative relationship between teachers’ use of threats and student learning outcomes. However, as Mormon (2000) notes, “when a message creates high perceived threat and the perceived response efficacy is also high, danger control processes are engaged and will dominate a person’s behavior resulting in message acceptance and attitude, intention, and behavioral changes” (p. 95). This literature suggests that it may be profitable for researchers interested in the use of antisocial BATS to examine their use in tandem with efficacy messages rather than their use alone.

Using the EPPM as a theoretical framework, the hypothesis posited that the interaction of fear and efficacy would result in higher student learning outcomes than the use of fear alone. Consistent with the hypothesis, the instructor’s use of fear and efficacy together produced significantly higher means on all of the dependent variables than the use of fear alone. However, given that the efficacy alone condition produced higher means for the outcome measures than any of the other conditions, the results of the present study are not entirely consistent with extant EPPM research. To review, EPPM predicts that the high threat/high efficacy condition should be more persuasive than the high efficacy alone condition.

These findings are, however, entirely consistent with instructional communication research. Overall, the results of the present study suggest that efficacy alone is a far
better compliance-gaining strategy than efficacy plus fear or any of the other conditions that were manipulated. These results are consistent with previous BAT research and support the advice emerging from that research— instructors should avoid using antisocial BATS. The instructional context may explain why prosocial strategies are more useful than in other contexts. Because many students may depend on an ongoing positive exchange for learning to continue, prosocial strategies alone may be quite effective. However, the use of fear may provide some students with the motivation to achieve what they may not otherwise. Our research extends current instructional research by noting that if teachers must resort to using antisocial strategies, such communication should include an efficacy statement that provides students with the means to avoid the negative consequences associated with the threat.

The findings of this study have substantial implications for instructors. Consistent with previous BAT research, students respond most favorably to an instructor who is encouraging and willing to help (i.e., the efficacy alone condition). It would be wonderful to simply recommend that instructors only and always use prosocial classroom-management techniques; however, some instructors may resort to the use of fear as a motivator. If and when instructors use fear, they should be trained to use it appropriately. They must learn to craft a threat combined with an efficacy statement that will positively influence student behavior. Without an efficacy statement, or providing students with a reasonable means for change, the use of fear risks a boomerang effect by fostering negative student attitudes toward the course and instructor. Moreover, the use of fear alone will likely lower students’ motivation and reduce the probability that they would seek help on future assignments with the instructor. In sum, instructors should avoid using fear alone as a technique for influencing student behavior.

It is important to understand that we do not advocate the arbitrary or capricious use of threats. If they use this strategy, teachers must carefully consider the behaviors they are trying to motivate the students to perform as well as the seriousness of not performing those behaviors. For example, it is reasonable to assume that speech instructors have likely used some form of threat to compel students to avoid acts of plagiarism, such as the threat of failing the course or dismissal from the university. Perhaps a fear appeal in this case is warranted. Instructors should be flexible enough in their communication styles to know when fear appeals are likely to be the best option with particular types of students. We know, for example, that some students engage in plagiarism because they perceive a low likelihood of being caught and/or that the consequences of being caught are not especially severe (Whitley & Keith-Spiegel, 2002). Teachers could certainly use fear and efficacy in this context to motivate such students to avoid academic dishonesty.

Limitations

Despite providing strong evidence that fear appeals are more effective when a threat is combined with an efficacy statement, this study is not without limitations. For
instance, the scenarios in this study manipulated fear when providing speech feedback. Other forms of instructional fear have yet to be explored. Additionally, the use of hypothetical scenarios is a limitation of the current study. Specifically, scenarios are not an exact replication of a classroom environment or even an instructor for that matter. It is difficult to accurately portray this environment in a few sentences. In addition, scenarios simplify the vast number of variables operating in a classroom at any given moment to only a few. Similarly, participants were given only a brief exposure to the fear appeal. Over time, the effects of fear appeals may differ. For example, an instructor who repeatedly uses fear may create negative associations, or the fear may lose its effectiveness over time. For example, an instructor might continually use threats without execution; over time, students may perceive the instructor’s threats as empty or without consequences. The same is true for efficacy. If the instructor does not follow through on offers to help, students will see future statements as disingenuous. Finally, the present study examined students’ behavioral intentions rather than their actual behavior.

Suggestions for Future Research

Communication scholars should continue to explore ways fear is used in the classroom. Initially, future researchers might consider manipulating the levels of threat and efficacy (high and low) rather than simply looking at the presence or absence of these statements, as was done in the present study. This type of manipulation might offer more insight into the ways in which the variables interact to influence student outcomes. Further, future research efforts should examine the types of threats and efficacy statements teachers use in order to develop a typology of effective and ineffective fear appeals for the classroom. These appeals could even be examined with particular attention paid to the type of student and specific classroom situation with which they are most likely to be successful. In addition, it would be beneficial to study the effects of fear on such commonly studied classroom variables as students’ perceptions of teacher immediacy and credibility. Consistent with the findings in this study, it is reasonable to suggest that students may find their instructors more immediate and credible if they use efficacy combined with fear rather than fear alone. Similarly, it would be profitable to explore students’ perceptions of instructor credibility based on the use fear in the classroom. Given the findings of this study regarding students’ affective learning, it seems clear that they would be much less likely to like the teacher if they used fear without efficacy. Finally, scholars should turn their attention toward students’ use of fear appeals. Scholars like Golish (1999) have already begun the task of examining the types of persuasive strategies students are likely to use in the classroom. This research could seek to determine the types of threats students make to instructors as well as the effects of these threats on instructors’ perceptions of students, motivation to teach, and dedication to the profession.

Instructors who inappropriately employ fear in the classroom put students’ educational success at risk. As a result, teachers must be trained to use fear appeals
appropriately by considering the diverse learning needs of their students, the learning task to be accomplished, and how to couple reasonable threats and efficacy statements. The importance of considering the use of efficacy statements when attempting to persuade through fear was outlined long ago by Aristotle when he said that “If there is to be the anguish of uncertainty, there must be some lurking hope of deliverance; and that this is so would appear from the fact that fear sets men deliberating—but no one deliberates about things that are hopeless” (The Rhetoric of Aristotle, 1960, p. 138). Teachers would be wise to carefully consider not only how to use fear to motivate students, but also how to give hope so that students can successfully complete the task.

References


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