Expert Teachers’ Instructional Communication in Golf

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Expert golf instructors self-monitor their instruction and communication more than any other aspects of their teaching (Schempp, McCullick, Busch, Webster, & Sannen-Mason, 2006). Despite its apparent importance, however, the communication of expert golf instructors has received little investigative attention. The purpose of this study was to examine the instructional communication behaviors of 4 of the most highly accomplished golf instructors in the United States. Ladies Professional Golf Association instructors who met criteria for expert teaching (Berliner, 1994) and 4 students participated in the study. Videotaping, stimulated recall, and semistructured interviews were used to collect data on the teachers’ immediacy, communication style, and content relevance behaviors. Data were analyzed using modified analytic induction (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Findings indicated that the experts adapted their communication behaviors in ways that fit students’ learning preferences, personal experiences, and lesson goals. The findings resonate with previous research on expert teaching in terms of experts’ instructional flexibility.

Keywords: expert teaching, golf instructors, teacher communication, communication behaviors

A number of pedagogical processes underpin expert teaching (Berliner, 1986, 1994, 2004; Tan, 1997). For example, experts’ pedagogical decisions reflect a deep and rich understanding of opportunities and constraints related to context-specific variables, such as students’ skill levels and available resources for instruction (Borko & Livingston, 1989; Carter, Sabers, Cushing, Pinnegar, & Berliner, 1987; Housner & Griffey, 1985; Smith & Strahan, 2004). Experts also use well-established managerial and instructional routines (Krabbe & Tullgren, 1989; Leinhardt & Greeno, 1986; Leinhardt, Weidman, & Hammond, 1987; Sharpe & Hawkins, 1992) while at the same time demonstrating adaptability during interactive teaching whenever the situation demands it (Borko & Livingston; Housner & Griffey; Sharpe & Hawkins).

Instructional communication, defined here as the behaviors enacted by teachers to send and receive verbal and nonverbal messages for instructional purposes,
might also be fundamental to expertise in teaching. Expert teachers use instructional communication skills in sophisticated and advantageous ways. When compared with nonexperts on a simulation task, experts employed superior interpretive skills to understand students’ nonverbal behavior and make judgments about student comprehension (Webb, Diana, Luft, Brooks, & Brennan, 2001). Experts also constructed explanations differently from nonexperts in an actual classroom environment (Sanchez, Rosales, & Canedo, 1999). Whereas nonexperts gave explanations that lacked focus and relevance, experts constructed straightforward explanations derived from continual evaluations of student responses to teacher questioning during classroom discourse.

Researchers in sport pedagogy have taken considerable interest in expert teaching, but few have studied experts’ instructional communication. Despite a recent increase more generally in attention to communication in sport (e.g., Kassing & Barber, 2007; Kassing & Pappas, 2007; Turman, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008), the literature lacks in-depth, descriptive studies of expert sport instructors’ communication behaviors. One context in which expert teaching research has flourished is golf instruction. Expert golf instructors were studied with respect to their sources of knowledge (Schempp, Templeton, & Clark, 1998), professional orientations (McCullick, Schempp, & Cumings, 1999), instructional routines (Baker, Schempp, Hardin, & Clark, 1998; Webster, Connolly, & Schempp, in press), interaction patterns with students (Schempp, McCullick, St. Pierre, et al., 2004), and working memory (McCullick, Hsu, Jung, Vickers, & Schuknecht, 2006).

Specific to instructional communication, Baker et al. (1998) and Schempp et al. (2004) found expert golf instructors to routinely ask purposeful questions of students and to prompt student communication. Experts’ verbal instruction was focused and made relevant to students’ prior experiences and knowledge, based on the information gleaned from the lesson opening. Descriptions and explanations were rich in nonliteral language (e.g., metaphors). Experts also reinforced their verbal instruction with physical manipulation, placing students into desired practice postures. These findings provide an initial glimpse of expert golf instructors’ instructional communication, but further research is needed to more fully examine this process, especially given that a recent study found expert golf instructors to self-monitor their instruction and communication skills more than all other aspects of their teaching (Schempp et al., 2006). This finding suggests that experts place much importance on being effective communicators and that communication skills might be central to expert golf instruction. Based on this premise, the purpose of the current study was to examine expert golf instructors’ communication behaviors. Specifically, the conceptual framework described herein was applied to a qualitative analysis of four elite golf instructors’ instructional communication.

A Conceptual Framework of Instructional Communication

Instructional communication research has mainly been conceptualized in and applied to classroom settings (Mottet, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006). However, many of the constructs from this research seem intuitively applicable to sport
immediacy, communication style, and content relevance. The primary basis for focusing on these constructs is that they have seldom seen attention in or been applied to sport pedagogy research. Their application in the current study has potential to extend the current literature base on expert golf instruction and, more specifically, to extend the findings of Baker et al. (1998) and Schempp et al. (2004) relative to expert golf instructors’ communication. Moreover, each construct was well operationalized in previous instructional communication research and has consistently been shown to hold significance in the teaching–learning process.

Immediacy

In the field of communication, pedagogical researchers have focused a great deal of attention on a variable they term teacher immediacy. Immediacy was first operationalized by Andersen (1978, 1979) and was based on Mehrabian’s work (1969, 1971) on interpersonal communication. Andersen (1978) defined immediacy as behaviors that “enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another” (p. 171, as cited in Richmond, Lane, & McCroskey, 2006). Verbal and nonverbal immediacy have been investigated. Gorham (1988) operationalized verbal immediacy with behaviors such as asking questions or encouraging the student to talk, addressing the student by name, using humor, and asking questions that solicit viewpoints or opinions. The most recent measure of nonverbal immediacy, developed by Richmond, McCroskey, and Johnson (2003), includes behaviors such as gesturing, touching a student on the arm or shoulder, looking directly at the student when talking to him or her, and smiling when talking to the student.

Communication Style

Norton (1978) first operationalized the communicator style construct, which consisted of nine styles marked by characteristic verbal and nonverbal presentational behaviors. The styles include friendly, relaxed, dominant, open, dramatic, animated, contentious, impression-leaving, and attentive. More recently, instructional communication researchers have shifted attention to teachers’ sociocommunicative styles, which are defined according to the communicator’s level of responsiveness, assertiveness, and versatility. Richmond and McCroskey’s (1995) Socio-Communicative Style scale measures one person’s perception of another’s style in terms of overall degree of assertiveness and responsiveness. Examples of assertive behaviors include defending one’s own beliefs, communicating forcefully, and acting as a leader, whereas examples of responsive behaviors include being helpful, being sympathetic, and being compassionate. A formal measurement for versatility has not been developed, but a person is generally considered a versatile communicator if he or she demonstrates the ability to communicate in both assertive and responsive ways, depending on what type of style a particular situation calls for (Richmond, 2002).
Content Relevance

Part of being an effective instructional communicator involves “encoding messages in a way that will connect with students” (Chesebro & Wanzer, 2006). Content relevance has been defined as a perception of whether course content meets personal needs and goals (Keller, 1983). Frymier and Shulman (1995) developed the most recent measure of content relevance. Examples of relevance are using examples to make the content relevant, explicitly stating how the material relates to the student’s career goals or life in general, asking the student to apply content to his or her own interests, and using the student’s experiences to demonstrate or introduce a concept.

Method

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger investigation, and only the methods relevant to the current study are reported in this article.

Participants

The Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), which helped fund this study with a grant, worked in collaboration with me to identify four of the most highly accomplished golf instructors in the United States. The criteria used in the identification process stem from Berliner’s (1994) developmental framework of expertise in teaching. Experts (a) had 20–25 years of golf instruction experience, (b) were LPGA certified, (c) had won formal recognition in the form of national-level awards and honors for their teaching accomplishments (e.g., LPGA Teacher of the Year, Golf Magazine’s Top 100 Instructors in America, Golf for Women Top 50), and (d) had taught students who had achieved notable success in golf. Given the interests of the LPGA, only women instructors were selected for this study.

Three men and one woman ranging in age from 19 to 27 were recruited to participate as student volunteers in the study with the help of the LPGA. The incentive for participation was receiving a free golf lesson from a renowned instructor. There was limited response to the invitation to participate, however, so despite seeking only beginning golf players, I decided to use four students with varying playing experience and skill level. Two of the students were beginning golfers who had never played on a golf course and had limited to no experience on driving ranges, and the other two were experienced and proficient golfers who played or practiced on a range regularly. The students all lived in close proximity to the sites where experts were scheduled to teach their golf lessons for the study. Throughout this report, codes are used in place of the teachers’ and students’ names to preserve confidentiality. The coding format for all participants is a letter (E for expert and S for student) followed by a number (e.g., E1).

Data Collection

After approval to conduct the study was granted by the institutional review board of my university, letters of invitation were mailed to the four experts. I telephoned each teacher approximately 2 weeks later to confirm her interest in participating
and schedule a time to collect data during a weekend falling between two major golf conventions held in Orlando, FL. Two golf course driving ranges were used to videotape each expert teaching a golf lesson to one of the students. There was little difference between the two facilities, and in each case the teacher was asked to follow the same procedures.

Experts brought their own golf clubs, and the LPGA secured golf balls and tees from the driving ranges used in the study. Each expert taught one 45- to 60-minute lesson on the full swing from a driving range station (i.e., lesson tee). During their lessons, experts wore a wireless microphone to ensure high-quality audio for data analysis. A mini-DV camcorder, mounted atop a tripod, was positioned about 15 feet behind the lesson tee to avoid obtrusiveness. Full-body shots of the teacher and student were maintained but the zoom was set close enough to see the participants’ faces clearly. In this way, nonverbal behavior such as teacher positioning and gesturing, as well as more subtle behaviors such as facial expressions, were captured. Mini-DV cassettes were later copied to DVD format for analysis.

Directly after their lessons, experts engaged in stimulated recall with me. Stimulated recall took approximately 30 minutes and involved using the video to prompt discussion regarding the teacher’s thought process at various points during the lesson. For the purpose of this study, stimulated-recall questions used by Housner and Griffey (1985) in a study of physical education teachers’ decision making were adapted to focus on teacher communication. The questions were (a) What are you doing in this segment and why? (b) What were you trying to convey to the student? (c) What were you noticing about the student? (d) How was the student responding? (e) Were you thinking of any alternative actions or strategies at this time? and (f) Did you consider alternative or multiple forms of communication (e.g., demonstrations, metaphors, questions, etc.)? I initially led the interview, focusing on the opening and closing of the lesson, as well as other lesson segments in which the teacher’s communication seemed critical. Afterward, the teacher was given an opportunity to identify additional segments she wished to review to discuss her communication behaviors.

In addition, I conducted a 30-minute semistructured interview with each participant (teachers and students) to inquire about the teachers’ communication behaviors. Interviews were carried out by telephone 2 weeks after the lessons and focused on asking participants to characterize the teachers’ instructional communication behaviors with respect to the constructs included in the conceptual framework. Each teacher reflected on the types of communication behaviors she typically used to teach golf, and each student recalled the types of communication behaviors his or her teacher used during the golf lesson. Semistructured interviews and stimulated-recall interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for analysis. All data-collection methods were pilot tested for usefulness in answering the research questions and feasibility of implementation before their use in this study.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data were qualitatively analyzed using modified analytic induction (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), in which the conceptual framework was used to guide data analysis
but the findings were ultimately derived “from the ground up” using inductive analysis. The videotaped lessons, stimulated recall, and semistructured interviews were examined to arrive at an understanding of the nature of the experts’ instructional communication behaviors. The most current operationalizations and definitions of each communication construct from the literature were used to frame observations of the teachers’ behaviors and code each behavior as relating to immediacy, communication style, or content relevance. The conceptual framework was also used to code teacher statements made during stimulated recall and teacher and student descriptions of communication behavior from the interviews. Coded behaviors were then searched for consistencies until themes emerged. Themes represented instances in which a communication behavior was consistently used by at least three of the four expert teachers.

Steps taken to verify the data and thereby increase the overall trustworthiness of the study included member checks and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I telephoned each participant near the completion of data analysis to check the accuracy of the emerging themes in terms of how closely the themes matched the participant’s views. In addition, the use of different data sources in this study enabled me to compare observational, stimulated-recall, and interview data with respect to the teachers’ communication behaviors and thereby strengthen the credibility of the findings.

**Findings**

Themes of communication behaviors emerged relative to each of the constructs informing the conceptual framework (see Table 1). The themes are described in relation to each construct.

**Table 1  Themes in the Experts’ Instructional Communication Behaviors**

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<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Immediacy</td>
<td>Show nonverbal immediacy.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ask student personal questions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Respond to student’s immediacy or nonimmediacy behaviors.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gain physical proximity.</td>
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<td>Style</td>
<td>Confident.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relaxed.</td>
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<td>Attentive.</td>
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<td>Versatile.</td>
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<td>Content relevance</td>
<td>Use student’s experiences to demonstrate or introduce concepts.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Explicitly state how content relates to student’s goals.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use examples to make content relevant to student.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Explicitly state how content relates to student’s future.</td>
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Immediacy

Showing Nonverbal Immediacy. The experts used nonverbal behaviors to signal approachability and warmth to their students. In their interviews, the students talked about feeling welcomed and encouraged by such teacher behaviors as a firm handshake, making eye contact, and smiling. Experts also discussed typically using these types of behaviors. For example, one of the experts said, “[I] allow the students to see as much of my face, including my eyes, if I can. . . . I think there’s sincerity, there’s meaning [in that]” (E3).

Another common nonverbal behavior the experts used, especially during the lesson opening, was maintaining neutral or positive body language. As stated by one of the experts,

I think there is a fine line between walking with your shoulders down and your head down, real quiet and all hunched up with your arms folded or your arms crossed. I mean you can do that sometimes, but if you do it too much, on the one hand . . . certainly it’s not body language that makes [people] think that you’re better than they are. But on the other hand . . . you can seem too timid. So I think you have to stay, I guess somewhat neutral . . . really neutral and available and I guess the main thing is just friendly. (E4)

Another expert said,

I’m careful about how I stand. I do catch myself crossing my arms in front of my chest often and I will, as soon as I catch myself, I’ll put my arms down to my side or put my hands sometimes behind my back, but that’s not the best posture, either. But I am always careful about how I use my hands and my body and my posture. (E3)

Asking Personal Questions. At the beginning of their lessons, the experts spent 5–8 minutes asking their students questions related to their past golf experience, sports experiences in general, life experiences in general, personality, reasons for taking a golf lesson, hobbies, personal and professional aspirations, physical limitations, and, when the student had golf experience, self-ratings as a golfer, average golf score, and strengths and limitations as a golfer. One student said about her teacher, “She asked me a lot of questions about my past, my sports history and stuff that I did in high school and stuff that I was involved with at school here. . . . I really like that—it made it a lot more personal” (S1). As indicated by the experts in their interviews, one purpose of asking these questions was to get students to talk about themselves and feel comfortable. By asking questions and simply listening to their students’ answers, the experts allowed them to take some control of the learning environment. Experts clearly valued an active student role in the lesson as a gateway to building a comfortable learning space for the student.

The experts also probed students with follow-up questions, which elicited more in-depth answers. For example, one of the experts discovered that her student had skied before and asked the student to share that experience. Another expert who asked her student to rate himself as a golfer continued to probe him by having him pick three or four things he needed to change in his game to get better. If one of the experts discovered her student had physical limitations or ailments,
she asked the student specific questions about the condition and asked what the student had done or was doing in terms of rehabilitation.

**Responding to Student’s Immediacy or Nonimmediacy.** The experts sought to increase their students’ comfort level by gauging their level of immediacy behaviors in response to those communicated by the student. The volume and intensity of immediacy behaviors used depended on the immediacy cues the teachers perceived in the student’s communication behaviors. For example, one expert said,

> I do my best to mirror [the student’s] body language, which just from a comfort level, they start to feel more comfortable when they start to see people who have similar mannerisms. It can put them at ease. . . . My job is to really mimic their [body language]—if they’re standing tall and straight, then I’m going to stand tall and straight. If they’re kind of hunched over and looking at the ground, then I’m going to be standing there hunched over and looking at the ground. (E1)

Another of the expert teachers said she monitored her physical proximity to the student when teaching based on whether she felt the student’s messages communicated approachability or avoidance. In her words, “There are times that I specifically back off and take my physical self out of the equation as much as I can, and then there are times where I might be particularly close or I might even squat down to talk to someone” (E3). Squatting down is a behavior that resurfaced several times in the experts’ interviews. As stated by one expert, its purpose is to “make [the student] feel bigger than I am, that it’s more about them than me” (E2).

**Gaining Physical Proximity.** Finally, despite being careful to respond to a student’s immediacy or nonimmediacy cues, the experts invariably attempted to gain physical proximity to the student while teaching. In the videotaped lessons, each expert began her lesson at a conversational distance from her student but moved in closer during instruction, to the point where she occupied much more of the student’s personal space. At times, this advancement was temporarily relinquished if a student showed signs of discomfort or stress, but a third of the way into her lesson, each expert was making physical contact with her student to position him or her to desired movement postures and manipulate his or her grip, stance, and golf swing. The most extreme example of this was when one of the expert teachers began her lesson standing approximately 10 feet away from her student, asking him questions. By the middle of the lesson, the teacher was holding onto the student’s arms and golf club, moving his body through the swing pattern she wanted him to learn and practice.

**Style**

**Confident Style.** The experts all communicated in ways that they, their students, and I believed signaled an assured attitude. A careful balance seemed to be in play as the experts communicated with their students, suggesting that they knew what they were talking about but also wanted to learn from the student. For example, making eye contact, gaining physical proximity, and physically positioning the student into desired movement forms, while constituting immediacy behaviors,
also communicated confidence from my perspective. Although confident, the teachers in no way communicated overly confident, dominating, or arrogant behavior, particularly considering the high volume of questioning that characterized their instructional communication, which seemed to signal a desire to learn from the student and not just take control of the lesson.

Students also perceived their teachers’ communication styles as confident, citing several teacher behaviors that played a role in their making that assessment. One student said about his teacher,

She stood straight up and that shows that she has confidence in her skills. Also, she never turned her back to me. . . . Also, she would ask me which way I’d feel more comfortable swinging, left handed or right handed, and she was willing to teach me either. (S2)

Another student said, “I would say [my teacher’s] very confident. She never stutters or doubts herself. She speaks clearly. She looks at you when she speaks. . . . Body-language-wise she never slouched or looked down toward the ground when she spoke” (S4). Later in his interview, the same student said,

She’s confident about what she’s speaking about. You can feel that she knows what she’s doing and there’s a fine line between confidence and arrogance. I think she’s right on the confidence line. She knows what she’s doing is correct; she knows what she’s talking about. (S4)

The experts described their communication style as confident, as well. One expert said about her style, “I think mainly it would be . . . my energy level, [my students] would feel a certain amount of energy, not spazo energy, but steady, solid, flowing-type energy that I think they could sense that they could depend on it” (E4). Another expert discussed the importance of showing confidence when she communicates, as shown in the following excerpt:

It’s very important to have a very positive body language, and when you look at successful people and their body language, how you stand and how your mannerisms are either exudes success or exudes nonsuccess. . . . If you start standing like a chump, then you won’t be a champ. (E1)

**Relaxed Style.** Norton (1978) discussed a relaxed communicator style as located at one end of a dimension, the opposite end of which is tense. He operationalized a relaxed style to include behaviors such as generally—or even under pressure—speaking in a calm and collected way using flowing and rhythmic speech patterns. A host of statements made by the students in their interviews supported the presence of a relaxed style in the experts’ instructional communication. One student continually revisited her teacher’s relaxed style with statements like “[My teacher] was very suave about [her communication]. . . . She was calm—she wasn’t hyper or anything like that. It was a good pace, nice and smooth.” “She was very, very relaxed. She was not uptight at all. She was very flexible. It was a very low-stress type of lesson. She just took her time and she let me take my time in learning it—she didn’t rush me through it.” “She was able to keep her cool the whole time.” “She was so calm about [golf] and it really made me realize that it’s definitely a sport that you can enjoy and it doesn’t have to be high stress” (S1).
Another student recalled, “[My teacher and I] were joking around and laughing throughout half the lesson. It was never serious to where I felt like I was being pressured to do things or [was] nervous” (S4).

The experts identified being relaxed as part of their communication style, as well. For example, one expert said, ‘I’m a very calm communicator. My communication style is smooth. Maybe, as I’m hesitating here, slow would be another way of putting it. Slow, smooth, and calm” (E3). Another expert said,

I would think that my communication style is direct without being heavy-handed. I would like to think that it’s easy-going and clear and it’s a style of communication that is accessible for the student to achieve the goals that they want to achieve. (E1)

**Open Style.** Norton (1978) defined an open communicator style as inclusive of “communicative activity which is characterized by being conversational, expansive, affable, convivial, gregarious, unreserved, unsecretive, somewhat frank, possibly outspoken, definitely extroverted, and obviously approachable” (p. 101). He went on to also say, “Stylistically, the open communicator readily reveals personal information about the self in communicative interactions. The counterpart of this notion is manifested in the poker-faced individual who is hard to read” (p. 101). Statements made by the teachers and the students indicated openness as a style dimension of the experts’ communication. For example, one of the experts said, “You have to make the student feel like they’re a part of the lesson; it’s about their progress and their success. So, I think I make it a dialogue between us” (E2). Another expert mentioned she used open body language to appear receptive to student communication. Examples of student statements that centered on the openness of their teachers’ communication include, “It was almost kind of like a compromise. . . . You do it this way, but we’re going to work on changing just one thing here. . . . We were kind of meeting in the middle” (S4) and “Some people are a little bit more rigid and uncomfortable and they tend to turn people away, but you could tell that she got pretty comfortable right away” (S2).

**Attentive Style.** Norton (1978) said the following about the attentive communicator style:

There is not much empirical research describing attentiveness per se as a style variable. As a broader concept, it is frequently embedded in interpersonal and therapeutic literature under the label “empathy” or “listening.” . . . In general, the attentive communicator makes sure that the other person knows that he is being listened to. (p. 101)

The expert golf instructors were careful listeners who attended with keen interest to their students. Examples of attentive style behaviors were preparing to listen, staying quiet while the student is speaking, listening without bias, clearing the mind of thought, opening up all senses, making eye contact with the student, listening to everything the student says, listening without interrupting, writing down what the student says, asking questions, and pausing when giving instruction
to get the student’s reactions. With respect to staying quiet while the student is speaking, one expert said the following:

Sometimes it’s telling myself to shut up. I enjoy talking, but I need to let the student get everything out that they need to verbally communicate with me before interjecting or interrupting and sometimes I tend to jump in. So I do have to tell myself, “Be quiet, let them finish” because everyone’s going to disseminate information at their own pace and sometimes it just takes some people longer to get the words out, and I need to be patient at letting that happen. (E1)

This teacher’s student recalled her teacher’s patience as a listener, indicating, “She listened to everything I had to say. . . . She let me finish every time that I was going to say something” (S1). Another student said about his teacher’s attentiveness,

She asked me questions about what my experience is with golf and she listened to my answers. . . . She was doing this to ensure she didn’t reteach me something I may have already known. And she actually watched me go through a full swing to see where my knowledge was. (S2)

**Versatile Style.** McCroskey, Richmond, and McCroskey (2002) state, “Teachers high in versatility would be expected to be able to adapt to different students’ communication more quickly and appropriately” (p. 388). Despite also showing strong tendencies to be confident, relaxed, open, and attentive, experts envisioned their style as continually changing to meet the communication needs of their students. As stated by one of the experts,

It’s going to be a style that’s constantly changing because the people who I’m dealing with, they’re changing every time the next lesson shows up. So I would have to say it’s flowing to the needs of the student and is evolutionary in nature because of whom I’m dealing with. It’s not just one style. I need to adapt to many different styles of people that come. (E1)

This expert went on to illustrate how her communication style changed with different students by telling a story about a lesson she taught to a retired lieutenant colonel, during which she realized he responded best to instruction that mirrored the style of a drill sergeant. She told him, “Colonel, I am the general. You take orders from me” (E1)! Another expert said about her style that it’s “fun when it has to be [and] serious when it has to be, depending on the student” (E2).

The videotaped lessons confirmed that the experts had in fact communicated in ways that seemed to match the style tendencies of their students. One expert, whose student was energetic and affable, became increasingly buoyant and humorous throughout the lesson. Another of the expert instructors taught a student who was more reserved and quiet. Her communication style matched his initially, although she took license in attempting approach behaviors later in the lesson (as discussed earlier, the experts tended to increase teacher immediacy by gaining
Although the students’ instructional communication was not the focus of this study, teacher and student styles appeared to converge in each of the lessons.

Content Relevance

Using the Student’s Experiences to Demonstrate or Introduce Concepts. Experts used student experiences to introduce or demonstrate golf concepts. It was clear in analyzing the experts’ content-relevance behaviors that these teachers not only remembered what their students told them during the lesson opening but also found ways to use that information to illustrate personal relevance for the student. A multitude of examples were evident to support this theme. In examining just one of the experts’ lessons, in which the teacher learned that her student’s experiences included playing the flute in a marching band, baton twirling, dancing, and snow skiing, the following teacher behaviors were observed: relating the posture of a stretching exercise to holding a baton, equating the nine iron in learning to play golf to the bunny slope in learning to ski, comparing the beat in music to the pace of a golf swing, explaining that the golf swing is fluid like a graceful dance performance, demonstrating how addressing the tee is like addressing the marching band director, comparing the grip pressure for holding a golf club to holding a flute with relaxed fingers, and emphasizing the importance of being responsive to the motion of the golf swing in the same way a skier responds to the terrain.

The experts’ interviews were replete with examples and stories of how they used their students’ experiences to communicate the relevance of golf content. As stated by one expert, “I would do my best at all times to use points or analogies that maybe are related to them personally, as far as other sports that they’ve played or hobbies or activities that they have or . . . maybe related to their work” (E3). Another expert said,

Most every golfer has played some other sport, and the principles of motion are pretty much the same in a lot of sports, including golf—dynamic balance, the release of your hands and forearms, rotation of your trunk—and so getting a person to realize that their golf swing is very similar to a lot of other motions they’ve made in other sports, they’re just setting up a different way and their equipment has changed. I think I’m pretty good at finding out what other sports they’ve played and using those analogies to help them become a better golfer. (E2)

One of the expert instructors told a story to illustrate how she made content relevant for a student she had previously taught:

I had one gentleman one time, he was so heavy-handed with his grip pressure, and it turned out that he did a lot of intricate work in his business [and] it took a very light touch to do what he did. So I associated his understanding, something he already knew how to do in his everyday work, and we applied it to golf. (E1)
The experts’ students also discussed this trend in their teachers’ communication behaviors. In the words of one student, “At first I was hitting the ball to the right a lot and then . . . [my teacher] related the swing of the golf club to a thing that I’m familiar with, spinning the ball from water polo. You have to put a curve on it” (S2). The student whose teacher’s relevance behaviors are described at length above recalled instructional messages that she found relevant from her lesson, explaining, “[My teacher] would use examples. . . . I played the flute in high school and she would show me how she would hold the flute and showed me that when you hold the flute, you hold it loosely and not tight and the same thing goes for a golf club” (S1).

**Explicitly Stating How Content Relates to the Student’s Goals.** Aside from student experiences, the expert teachers tapped into another dimension of the student’s background to convey the relevance of golf to the student. Each teacher learned about her student’s personal and professional goals at the beginning of the lesson and then repeatedly tied the lesson content to these goals in her instructional communication. As stated by one of the experts in her interview, “I think I’m pretty good at being able to relate and maybe stay relevant with what the person needs and what they want and what would help them” (E3). Another expert said, “I try to find one main thing and I try to relate that back to what [the student] told me they want or what they don’t want. . . . I always relate it back to something specifically they told me that they needed to get better at or improve” (E4). One of the experts spoke at length about using the student’s goals to guide her instruction:

Certainly [for me it’s] going in and asking them what the goal would be for the lesson here today and then keeping that as a thread throughout the whole lesson. . . . I think it’s being, “Here’s what you’ve come here to accomplish, here’s what I hear you saying and wanting to walk away with here today so that you feel successful, so here’s what we’re going to do, here’s our game plan, here’s what you’re doing, here’s what I think will improve it, and here’s how we’re going to change it.” (E1)

The videotape data revealed several examples of this theme. Perhaps the most pronounced example was when one expert had her student, who was an experienced golfer, use mental imagery as a vehicle toward attaining the goal he said he wanted to achieve in golf. The teacher told her student to close his eyes and imagine having accomplished this goal. She then had him describe to her what it felt like being in that context and respond to the question, “Was it worth all the work it took to get there” (E4)? When he affirmed that it was, the teacher had him open his eyes and she began the lesson, focusing without deviation on the core element she believed he needed to change in taking the first step toward reaching his goal.

**Using Examples to Make Content Relevant to the Student.** The experts used many supporting examples connecting the subject matter of golf to common experiences and ideas with which the students would likely be familiar.
examples of this theme included comparing golf clubs to people in terms of variety, comparing a comfortable preswing posture to bent (as opposed to stiff) knees when walking, demonstrating the importance of breathing before swinging by talking about letting the air out of a balloon, comparing using a tee in the fairway to using training wheels on a bike, using the concept of a frame to talk about the proper stance and swing, comparing the shoulder rotation in the swing to turning a steering wheel, and citing professional players as examples of good technique.

Teacher and student interviews reaffirmed this theme. For example, one expert said about her use of relevancy behaviors, “I will mention that good players or people who are performing their best will do it [a certain] way” (E3). This teacher’s student, who mentioned to the teacher that he watched golf on television, recalled that his teacher had used as examples the professional players he had told her he watched. In his words, “she mentioned a couple of fellow’s names . . . and how your leg should stay straight at impact and how it causes better contact and more consistency” (S3).

Explicitly Stating How Content Relates to the Student’s Future. Finally, the experts endeavored to communicate content relevance by connecting the lesson to the student’s future in ways that went beyond the student’s expressed goals or interests. The experts seemed to serve as ambassadors for the sport. For example, one explained to her beginning student the importance of improving her short game with respect to shooting a lower score in the future. Even though the student did not indicate whether she planned to play golf in the future, the expert constructed a future context for her to consider. The other experts engaged similar behaviors such as telling the student what equipment she would need to buy as a beginning golfer, emphasizing the importance of practice for improvement, and explaining how the student could use the lesson content to play on a golf course.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine expert golf instructors’ immediacy, communication style, and content-relevance behaviors. On a general level, this study complements the current literature on expert teaching. Numerous researchers have reported on experts’ ability to take advantage of contextual affordances, such as available resources, to increase instructional effectiveness (Borko & Livingston, 1989; Carter et al., 1987; Housner & Griffey, 1985; Smith & Strahan, 2004). In the current study, experts made excellent use of the one teacher to one student instructional format by employing personalization strategies (e.g., responding to students’ immediacy or nonimmediacy, asking personal questions, having a versatile communication style, using student experiences to demonstrate or introduce a concept). The experts’ ability to temper their immediacy behaviors to match student immediacy and employ versatile communication styles reflects what others have found relative to expert teachers’ adaptability during interactive teaching (Borko & Livingston; Housner & Griffey; Sharpe & Hawkins, 1992). This study also supports the findings of Sanchez et al. (1999), who studied the expositive discourse of expert classroom teachers and found that experts used numerous
examples as supports when giving explanations and connected new topics to students’ prior knowledge.

Specific to expert golf instruction, this study both reaffirms and extends previous research, particularly the studies reported by Baker et al. (1998) and Schempp et al. (2004), in which experts were found to ask students questions about their background, subsequently tailor instruction to connect with students’ prior experiences and knowledge, and enhance instructional clarity with nonliteral language and physical positioning. Similarly, the current study found that experts asked students personal questions, used information gained about students to make content personally meaningful and relevant, and gained physical proximity to work with the student using a hands-on approach. I also found, however, that experts employ immediacy and style behaviors to supplement their personalized approach to teaching. An additional contribution of this study is the in-depth description and detail in regard to experts’ communication behaviors.

The constructs of immediacy, communication style, and content relevance, heretofore applied almost exclusively to classroom research, provided a useful conceptual framework for gaining perspective on the instructional communication process in expert golf instruction. Appearing approachable, being able to manipulate communication style, and relaying how what is being taught relates to what the student needs, wants, or already understands all seem to hold as much merit in successful golf instruction as in successful classroom teaching. This is encouraging in that instructional communication constructs, including but not limited to those applied in this study, might offer sport pedagogues alternative ways to conceptualize and understand teacher and coach behaviors.

Researchers examining communication in sport pedagogy might also consider adopting alternative perspectives of instructional communication. For example, Beebe, Beebe, and Ivy (2004) presented a model portraying instructional communication as an action, an interaction, or a transaction. As an action, communication is unidirectional, originating only from the teacher. As an interaction, communication is a “message exchange process” in which “teachers remain receptive to the verbal and nonverbal feedback they receive from their students and then, after receiving the feedback, adapt their instructional messages accordingly” (Mottet & Beebe, 2006, p. 13). Finally, as a transaction, communication is “a process where meaning is cocreated or mutually stimulated by the source and the receiver, who send and receive verbal and nonverbal messages simultaneously” (p. 14).

In the current study, the focus was restricted only to the teachers’ communication (i.e., communication as action), but the findings suggest that a more apt framework might be constructed from the idea that experts communicate based on feedback from students (i.e., communication as interaction). This would imply a need to also conceptualize and study students’ communication behaviors in relation to the teacher’s. There is a precedent for this type of research, wherein students’ use of humor, nonverbal immediacy, and verbal and nonverbal responsiveness are among several variables that have been investigated (see Mottet, Beebe, & Fleuriet, 2006, for a review).

In conclusion, this study might provide some direction for teachers seeking to develop their expertise. Despite the fact that the study focused on only four
experts, the data show a clear propensity among the teachers to communicate in several similar ways. Future research should endeavor to examine whether the themes found in this study are representative of other expert golf instructors’ (both female and male) communication behaviors and whether nonexperts communicate in similar or different ways. In addition, although there were no notable differences in experts’ communication when considering students’ gender, age, or skill level in this study, research using a larger sample might reveal important differences too subtle to be recognized when comparing only four cases. However, perhaps the most important direction for future research will be to investigate the relationship between experts’ communication behaviors and instructional outcomes, because this might help identify critical communication skills for teaching golf successfully. This study demonstrates, as others have, that expertise in teaching derives in part from the ability to skillfully communicate. Sport instructors will no doubt benefit from an increased understanding of what such skill entails and how it can be developed and applied to achieve optimal performance.

References


