One theory about teacher effects considers the concept of teacher immediacy. As one recent study explains, “the concept of immediacy was first developed by Albert Mehrabian, who conceptualized immediacy as those communication behaviors that ‘enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another’…Findings from some early nonverbal communication studies implied that immediacy behaviors might have some general effects in the teaching-learning context…” [pp. 184-185] Besides analyses of in-class teacher effects, the concept can have relevance for potential differences that may occur in distance education environments. Ideally, analyses of distance education should consider the construct of immediacy in their models.

To summarize the existing research on this topic, a team of researchers (Witt, Wheeless & Aiken) did a meta-analysis of 81 studies that encompassed 24,474 students. Consistent with the reporting of meta-analysis results in academic journals, the authors use “r” for the simple correlation; “k” for the number of samples included in the meta-analysis, and “N” for the number of individuals included in the k samples. Their findings include the following, among others:

1. “The synthesized result of the meta-analysis of the entire body of quantitative findings indicated a meaningful relationship between overall teacher immediacy and overall learning, average r = .500…Published research, average r = .505, k = 54, N = 15,619, and unpublished research, average r = .490, k =27, N = 8,855, produced similar results in terms of magnitude of association between teacher immediacy and overall learning. Likewise, statistically significant differences were not detected between results for United States samples, average r = .506, k = 67, N = 21,774, and non-United States samples, average r = .468, k = 14, N = 2,700…” [p. 197] [Note: The comparison of non-U.S. samples indicates that the association occurs across cultures.]

2. “In overall learning attributable to overall teacher immediacy, statistically significant differences were obtained between the results from survey-questionnaire research, average r = .518, k = 74, N = 22,915, and experimental studies, average r = .306, k = 7, N = 1,559…” [p.197] [Note: Survey vs. experimental method is apparently a moderator of the correlation found in the studies.]

3. [As a caveat to the results…] “The testing of variances within the groupings discussed above, however, revealed greater variance than would be expected from random sampling error alone. Results from heterogeneous samples may be useful to affirm the direction and relative strength of association…” [p.197]

4. “…as verbal and nonverbal immediacy increase, students perceive that they are learning more…” [p.199] [Note: this refers to the dimension of perceived learning, one of the three dimensions of learning studied. The other two dimensions were affective learning and cognitive learning.]

5. “…the results of the meta-analysis confirm the relationship such that, as verbal and nonverbal immediacy increase, affective learning meaningfully increases…” [p.199]

6. “The cognitive learning outcome reflects the lowest learning association across types of teacher immediacy. Also, this category reflects the fewest number of studies and the largest proportion of experimental designs…” [p.200] [Note: So further research is important for this area.]

7. “A synthesis of the first 23 years of immediacy and learning research lends credence to the view of many instructional communication scholars—that even though students like more highly immediate teachers and think they learn more from their courses, actual cognitive learning is not affected as much as they think it is…” [p.201]
The study has relevance for analysts of higher education because it links actual teacher behaviors to dimensions of student learning, including persistence and motivation. It may also indicate one factor in the persistence rate of students who attempt distance education and the relative “success” of different programs or instructors in distance education.

Paul L. Witt (Department of Communication, Texas Christian University), Lawrence R. Wheeless (Department of Communication, University of North Texas), and Mike Allen (Department of Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) document their study in an article (“A Meta-Analytical Review of the Relationship between Teacher Immediacy and Student Learning”) in the journal Communication Monographs (Vol. 71, No. 2, June 2004, pp. 184-207). The article includes five pages of references. The article lists the studies included in the meta-analysis and the sources used in their literature review for the article.

Additional abstracts of research can be viewed at our website at: http://www.cccco.edu/SystemOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/ResearchandPlanning/AbstractsofResearch/tabid/298/Default.aspx

[Abstract done by Willard Hom, Director, Research & Planning Unit, System Office, California Community Colleges, 2/23/05]