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The Effects of Using Peer Workshops on Speech Quality, Public Speaking Anxiety, and Classroom Climate

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Recent basic communication course scholarship has tended to utilize a surprisingly monolithic view of how basic course pedagogy is enacted. While both published and oral discourses (i.e., convention dialogues) recognize some invariance from one institution to another and even one teacher to another, the basic model for how public speaking is taught is generally the same: teachers use a combination of teacher-enacted lecture/recitation/activity behavior to help student build skills in preparation for speeches. Notably, this approach is successful—teachers have a great deal of flexibility in how they are able to teach, and, generally speaking, the basic public speaking course is recognized as a key experience in students' liberal education activities (see Titsworth, Bates, & Kinneston, 2006). At the same time we should heed calls to rigorously question and explore how pedagogy is enacted in the discipline (see Sprague 1993). In answering this call we have explored the effectiveness of using peer workshops as an alternative pedagogy for teaching public speaking.

Structured in-class peer workshops have only recently been introduced as a strategy for teaching public speaking, and more research needs to be done to estab-
lish the effects of these workshops on students’ experiences and course outcomes. Peer workshops are a pedagogical strategy that allows students to solicit and share critical feedback with one another in small groups during the speech development and revision process. To date, we primarily have theoretical support (Broeckelman, 2007) and anecdotal evidence of the benefits of using these workshops in public speaking courses, but additional evidence about the effects of peer workshops is needed. The purpose of this study is to quantitatively assess the impacts of peer workshops on speech quality, public speaking anxiety, and classroom climate.

The purpose of this study was to analyze assessment results examining the relative effectiveness of peer workshops in terms of their effects on students’ speech grades, levels of self-reported public speaking anxiety, and perceptions of classroom climate. Our assessment design used a within-subjects approach where students’ grades from speech 1 and 2 were compared, as were their reported levels of PSA and perceived classroom climate from a pre-test, just after speech 1 and just after speech 2. The field experiment conducted in this study allows us to compare changes in students’ scores for three different groups: (1) no workshops, (2) workshops with one-time introductory TA training, and (3) workshops with ongoing TA training and support.

**Peer Workshops**

Peer workshops are a form of in-class supportive instruction in which students are given an opportunity to share drafts of their speeches and solicit constructive
feedback from one another during the speech development process. During a structured peer workshop experience, students work through a workshop modeling exercise, develop guidelines for providing feedback together, and use a structured peer workshop form for guidance as they offer written and oral comments to help one another clarify ideas and improve speech quality (see Broeckelman, Brazeal, & Titsworth, 2007, for detailed instructions). While it is possible that instructors were using versions of peer workshops in public speaking before then, this type of peer workshops for public speaking was first developed, formally implemented across multiple sections of public speaking, and written about in 2005 (Broeckelman, 2005). Writings since then have offered theoretical support (Broeckelman, 2007) and instructions for implementing peer workshops (Broeckelman, Brazeal, & Titsworth, 2007), but have not offered further research evidence about their effects on students.

Though they are a relatively new pedagogical strategy in public speaking courses, peer workshops have been used and studied in English composition courses for some time. Atwell (1998) and Spear (1993) provide guidance for workshop-based approaches to teaching writing. An emphasis on the process of writing rather than just the end product that can be found in workshop-based approaches to teaching writing help students see that writing is a learned skill rather than a “gift” that only a few people have (Charney, Newman, & Palmquist, 1995) and helps them improve their writing through ongoing critique and reflection (Mondock, 1997).
However, other instruction techniques that share elements of peer workshops have been studied and provide some indication of what types of measurable outcomes can reasonably be expected from peer workshops in public speaking courses. For example, Smith and Frymier (2006) found that practicing speeches with an audience improves performance. Since students are invited to practice their speeches for their peers in a peer workshop, similar improvements in speech quality should result. Second, some schools have developed communication laboratories in which students can obtain individualized feedback and assistance from instructors outside of class (Morreale, Ellis, & Mares-Dean, 1992; Ellis, 1995). Participation in such labs has been shown to increase self-perceived competency and decrease communication apprehension (Ellis, 1995). Since peer workshops offer similar feedback and assistance from peers in the classroom where all students can participate, participation in peer workshops should result in lower levels of communication apprehension. Third, peer workshops are a specific adaptation of cooperative learning techniques, which have been found to increase individual achievement, increase liking among students, improve self-esteem and social skills, and increase positive attitudes toward the college or university (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998). Considering these effects of cooperative learning, we can expect to see similar positive gains in perceived classroom climate when peer workshops are used in public speaking classes.
PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY

McCroskey (1978) defines oral communication apprehension (CA) as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated (oral) communication with another person or persons” (p. 192). CA is generally thought of as being one of three types: (1) trait-CA, which is considered an enduring personal characteristic of individuals who are apprehensive in most communication situations; (2) context-CA, which is an enduring personal characteristic of individuals who are always apprehensive in very specific types of situations, but not all situations; or (3) state-CA, which is the “here-and-now’ response of a person in any communication situation” (Booth-Butterfield & Gould, 1986, p. 194-195). However, Booth-Butterfield and Gould (1986) found that state- and context-CA are highly correlated, and most scholars now think of CA as including two constructs: state- and trait-CA. Moreover, 52% of state CA can be predicted by trait CA, so these are closely related but separate constructs (Harris, Sawyer, & Behnke, 2006).

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a specific type of CA which refers to apprehension and fear related to public speaking contexts, which makes it a particularly salient problem for students in public speaking courses (Mottet, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006). There are three inventories that are frequently used to measure PSA: the Personal Report of Communication Anxiety, or the PRCA-24 (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998): the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety, or PRPSA (McCroskey, 1970), and the state communication anxiety form (Booth-Butterfield & Gould, 1986). All of these
measures have been validated, but for the purposes of this study, the Booth-Butterfield and Gould (1986) State Form will be used because the items refer explicitly to a communication experience that was just completed.

It is particularly important that CA be included as a variable in this study because other research has shown that CA can be reduced through the assistance of communication labs (Ellis, 1995) and through practicing speeches in front of an audience (Smith & Frymier, 2006), both of which are similar to components of the peer workshops. McIntyre, Thivierge, and MacDonald (1997) also found that an interested and responsive audience, which is more likely to be the case when students have worked together and are invested in each other’s speeches, generates less CA in the speaker.

**CONNECTED CLASSROOM CLIMATE**

Connected classroom climate is characterized by a sense of community, positive climate, and a sense of connectedness and “belongingness” among students in a class (Dwyer et al., 2004). Academic and social integration are similar constructs which reflect a sense of belonging and affiliation with the college or university. Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan (2000) argue that academic activities and classroom-based experiences heavily influence academic integration. Because academic integration is closely linked with student retention, these authors argue that courses for first-year college students are particularly important and that efforts should be made to incorporate more active and cooperative learning into these courses. Likewise, Berger and Milem
(1999) point out that “involvement with student peers and faculty generally has positive benefits for first-year students” (p. 662). Since most of the students enrolled in public speaking are typically first-year students and since peer workshops give students an opportunity to work in small groups and to build relationships with other students, we expect that peer workshops will facilitate the development of a more connected classroom climate.

**Research Goals and Predictions**

This study uses a split-plot, within-subjects ANOVA design with one independent variable (between-subjects factor), workshop implementation group, for each of three dependent variables (within-subjects factors): speech quality, public speaking anxiety, and connected classroom climate. The purpose of this study is to find out whether the use of peer workshops in public speaking classes significantly affects speech quality, communication apprehension, and connected classroom climate. Compared to students in courses that do not use peer workshops, we anticipate that students enrolled in courses that use peer workshops will have greater increases in speech quality, will have greater reductions in communication apprehension, and will perceive greater positive changes in connected classroom climate over time.
METHOD

Research Settings

Participants for this study included undergraduate students who were enrolled in the basic public speaking course at two large public universities, one of which is located in the Midwest and the other of which is located in Appalachia. Public speaking is a required course for most or all undergraduate students at both universities. Graduate students teach stand alone sections of the course, but are loosely supervised by a faculty Basic Course Director and share a common syllabus, assignments, and final exam at each university. At the Midwest University, all courses are taught using the same peer workshop strategies; at the Appalachian University, a few instructors use peer workshops, while others use a more traditional teaching format that does not include peer workshops.

For this study, GTAs were asked to invite their public speaking students to participate in this study. The GTAs were also asked to serve as liaisons who distributed survey web links to their students, gave two extra credit points to students for completing each survey, and provided student speech grades to the researchers.

Participating GTAs and their students were divided into three groups. Group 1 included students who were enrolled in sections of public speaking that were taught without formalized peer workshops at the Appalachian University. Group 2 included students who were enrolled in sections of public speaking that were taught with peer workshops at Appalachian University. GTAs in this group participated in a 30-minute training session during which they participated in a simulated
workshop modeling exercise and were given detailed written instructions and materials for conducting workshops in their own classes. Group 3 included students who were enrolled in sections of public speaking that were taught with peer workshops at Midwest University. GTAs in this group received the same introductory training as Group 2. Additionally, these GTAs participated in two supplemental training sessions later in the semester.

Participants

A total of 584 students participated in at least one of the surveys. Before data could be analyzed, all of the participants’ survey responses and speech grades were compiled in a single SPSS database. PSA and classroom climate scores were calculated for each student at each data collection point using the guidelines suggested by the authors of each scale. Next, students who did not take every survey or have speech grades available were eliminated from the database since complete data sets are required for within-subjects analyses. This left a total of 286 potential cases for analysis.

However, because equal group size is important for within-subjects analyses, especially when it is expected that some effect sizes will be small, we chose to equalize the size of each group before analyzing the data. A frequency analysis indicated that there were a total of 87 students in Group 1 (no workshops), 53 students in Group 2 (workshops with basic GTA training), and 146 students in Group 3 (workshops with extensive GTA training). Next, SPSS was used to randomly select 53 cases from each group to be included in the subsequent
analysis since the smallest group contained 53 participants.

Of the 159 cases retained for this analysis, 78.6% (n = 125) were first-year students, 15.1% (n = 24) were sophomores, 2.5% (n=4) were juniors, 3.1% (n = 5) were seniors, and 0.6% (n = 1) did not list an academic rank. 60.4% (n = 96) of the participants were female, and 39.6% (n = 63) were male. The average age of all participants was 19.3 years, and the average grade point average was 2.98.

**Data Collection**

Student participants were asked to take an online survey at three points in time throughout the quarter or semester in which they were enrolled in the public speaking course. These surveys included demographic items, PSA measures, and classroom climate measures. PSA was measured using Booth-Butterfield and Gould’s (1986) State Communication Anxiety Inventory, which includes twenty items measured with a four-point Likert-type scale. The authors report an overall reliability of $\alpha = .912$ for this scale and include items such as, “I felt tense and nervous,” and “My words became confused and jumbled when I was speaking” (p. 199). Classroom climate was measured using Dwyer, Bingham, Carlson, Prisbel, Cruz, and Fus’s (2004) Connected Classroom Climate Inventory, which includes eighteen items measured with a five-point Likert scale. The authors report an overall reliability of $\alpha = .94$ for this scale and include items such as, “I feel a strong bond with my classmates,” and “The students in my class are supportive of one another” (p. 268).
Instructors were asked to give their students the links to the survey websites at the appropriate times. The first survey was administered during the first two weeks of the course. This survey was used as a pretest to obtain baseline measurements of PSA and perceived classroom climate for each student. The second survey was administered after students gave their informative speech presentations, which was the first major speech given in the public speaking class at each university. The third survey was administered after students gave their persuasion or argument speech presentations. After the surveys were administered, the researchers gave each instructor a list of his or her students who completed each survey so that extra credit points could be awarded.

When the course was completed, the researchers obtained students' speech grades from the course instructors so that the grades could be used as measures of speech quality. Even though instructors vary in grading leniency, which makes a direct comparison of speech grades across students taught by different instructors invalid, instructors are likely to maintain a fairly consistent degree of grading leniency throughout a course, so a within-subjects comparison of speech grades is a valid indicator of individual student improvement in speech quality.

**RESULTS**

Split-plot within-subjects ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether there were changes in dependent variables (speech grades, PSA, and perceived classroom climate).
climate) over the course of the academic term. This design also allowed us to determine whether any changes in participants’ scores differed between the three groups. Alpha was set at $p < .05$ for all tests unless otherwise noted.

**Speech Grades**

A within-subjects split-plot analysis was conducted to determine whether speech grades from the first speech to the second speech changed differently among groups. Wilk’s Lambda was significant for speech grades, $\lambda = .144$, $F(1, 156) = 26.248$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .144$, and for speech grades by group, $\lambda = .887$, $F(2, 156) = 9.922$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .113$. Tests of within-subjects effects were significant for speech grades, $F(1, 156) = 26.248$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .144$, and for speech grades by group, $F(2, 156) = 9.922$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .113$. Within subjects contrasts for speech grades showed significant linear trends, $F(1, 156) = 26.248$, $p < .05$, and within subjects contrasts for speech grades by group also showed significant linear trends, $F(2, 156) = 9.922$, $p < .05$. An interaction graph depicting the results is shown in Figure 1.

As Figure 1 illustrates, Group 1 had little or no improvement in the quality of their speeches from the first to the second speech. Group 2 showed the greatest improvement from the first to the second speech. Group 3 fell somewhere in the middle and showed some improvement. It is important to remember as we examine the graph that the actual speech grades cannot easily be compared between groups or even individuals since different instructors have varying degrees of leniency in their grading, but the improvement change in score
from one speech to the next does provide a meaningful indicator of skills improvement. These findings suggest that peer workshops significantly improve the quality of student speeches over time and effectively enhance learning and skills development in public speaking courses.

Figure 1: Speech grades by group

To further probe the significant interaction, grade change scores were calculated for each participant by subtracting the first speech grade from the second speech grade. Means and standard deviations for each group are included in Table 1. A ONEWAY ANOVA was
conducted and showed that there was a significant difference in the amount of change in speech grades among groups, $F(2, 156) = 9.922, p < .05$. Because Levene’s test of Homogeneity of Variances was not significant, Tukey post-hoc tests with Bonferroni-adjusted alpha levels set at .0166 were conducted. Results for the post-hoc tests indicated significant differences between Groups 1 and 2, $p < .01$, and between Groups 2 and 3, $p < .01$, but not between Groups 1 and 3, $p = .368$.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Speech 1</th>
<th>Speech 2</th>
<th>Grade Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1: No workshops</td>
<td>86.32</td>
<td>7.98</td>
<td>86.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2: Workshops Basic Training</td>
<td>83.25</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>89.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3: Workshops, Extensive Training</td>
<td>85.17</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>87.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Public Speaking Anxiety**

A within-subjects split plot analysis was also conducted to determine whether PSA changed differently over time for each group. Unlike speech grades, we can meaningfully compare the levels of PSA at any point in time as well as improvements over time because PSA was measured by the students using a valid self-report scale. For this analysis, Wilk’s Lambda was significant for PSA, $\lambda = .861$, $F(2, 155) = 12.469, p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .139$, $\eta^2_p = .139$.
and for PSA by group, \( \lambda = .925, F(4, 310) = 3.100, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .038 \). Mauchley’s test of sphericity was not significant, \( p = .460 \), so the values of epsilon with sphericity assumed were used. Tests of within-subjects effects were significant for PSA, \( F(2, 312) = 13.766, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .081 \), and for PSA by group, \( F(4, 312) = 3.254, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .012 \). Within subjects contrasts for PSA showed significant linear trends, \( F(1, 156) = 24.515, p < .05 \), but not quadratic trends, \( F(1, 156) = 17.443, p < .05 \). Within subjects contrasts for PSA by group also showed significant linear trends, \( F(2, 156) = 4.273, p < .05 \), but not quadratic trends, \( F(2, 156) = 2.010, p = .137 \). Tests of between-subjects effects indicate that there are no significant overall group differences, \( F(2, 156) = 1.040, p = .356 \). However, pairwise comparisons indicate that there

![Figure 2: Public speaking anxiety by group](image-url)
were significant differences in PSA during the third measurement between Group 1 and Group 2 and between Group 2 and Group 3. A visual inspection of the plot shown in Figure 2 confirms that PSA scores for all three groups are very similar at the first measurement, but change in different ways for subsequent measurements. Group 1 shows the most consistent and substantial decrease in PSA. PSA for Group 2 decreased only slightly and leveled off after measurement 2, and Group 3 remained fairly level at measurement 2 and decreased substantially by measurement 3.

**Classroom Climate**

A within-subjects split plot analysis was also conducted to determine whether perceived classroom climate changed differently over time for each group. Like PSA, a valid self-report scale was used by students, so we can meaningfully compare the levels of Classroom Climate at any point in time as well as changes over time. Wilk’s Lambda was significant for Classroom Climate, $\lambda = .860$, $F(2, 155) = 12.609, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .140$, and for Classroom Climate by group, $\lambda = .911$, $F(4, 310) = 3.685, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .045$. Mauchley’s test of sphericity was significant, $p < .05$, so the Greenhouse-Geisser corrections of epsilon were used. Tests of within-subjects effects were significant for Classroom Climate, $F(1.806, 713.973) = 16.715, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .097$, and for Classroom Climate by group, $F(3.612, 136.577) = 3.197, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .039$. Within subjects contrasts for Classroom Climate showed significant linear trends, $F(1, 156) = 24.994, p < .05$. Within subjects contrasts for Classroom Climate by group showed only significant quadratic trends, $F(2,
156) = 5.336, p < .05. Tests of between-subjects effects indicate that there are no significant overall group differences, $F(2, 156) = .563, p = .571$, and there were no significant pairwise comparisons. A visual inspection of the plot shown in Figure 3 indicated that, while within-subjects trends differed, the overall scores at each point were not substantially different. Group 1 remained fairly level from measurement 1 to measurement 2, and then increased substantially at measurement 3. Groups 2 and 3, however, increased the most from measurement 1 to measurement 2, and then remained fairly level from measurement 2 to measurement 3. This could indicate that classes that use workshops experience slightly greater gains in classroom climate earlier in the term, but classes that do not use workshops have greater gains in classroom climate later in the term.

As can be seen most clearly in Figure 3, Groups 2 and 3, both of which use peer workshops, show improvements in Classroom Climate between the pretest and first speech, but Classroom Climate levels stay fairly level between the first and second speeches. However, there is a marked difference in the degree to which a positive classroom climate is achieved.
DISCUSSION

The purpose of our study was to report results of a field experiment testing the effects of using the workshop approach to teach public speaking. With respect to changes in students’ speech grades, levels of PSA, and perceived classroom climate we were able to draw three conclusions, one of which we expected, one of which we were encouraged by, and one that motivates us to continue exploring this approach.

First, results of the within subjects tests showed something we expected: Over the course of the academic term all students’ scores for speech grades, PSA and perceived classroom climate improved. In the case of
speech grades, students’ scores generally improved from a mid to low “B” grade to a mid to high “B” grade from speech 1 to speech 2. Students’ PSA scores generally decreased, with the greatest drop occurring between the first and second speeches. Finally, students’ perceptions of the classroom climate generally increased as the quarter progressed. All three of these within-subjects’ effects are somewhat expected because as the course progresses students should become more comfortable with the class and improve in their skill as speakers.

Second, we were encouraged by the effects observed for students in the two workshop conditions. While there was some inconsistency in observed effects, students who were in classes using workshops showed significantly greater improvement in their speech grades from speech 1 to speech 2. Specifically, workshop students’ scores improved from just over 83% to just over 89%, and from approximately 85% to approximately 87% for groups 2 and 3, respectively. While there were more inconsistent effects for PSA and perceived classroom climate when comparing the two workshop groups, students in those conditions did show less PSA and more positive perceptions of classroom climate as the term progressed. Based on this evidence we conclude that workshops are a viable and productive pedagogical option in the basic public speaking course. This empirical evidence coupled with strong theoretical reasons for using workshops (see Broeckelman, 2007) should lead others to consider integrating this approach into their own programs.

Third, we are curious to further explore some of the inconsistent findings observed when comparing the two workshop groups against the non-workshop group. In
the case of speech grades there was less inconsistency—students' scores from speech 1 to speech 2 remained remarkably stable in the non workshop condition and showed meaningful improvement in the two workshop conditions. For PSA, however, there were interesting differences. Whereas the non workshop students reported a consistent linear decrease in PSA from the pre-test to just after the first and second speeches, students' scores in the two workshop conditions showed evidence of curvilinearity. And, the curvilinear trends were inconsistent. From the pre-test to just after speech 1, students' PSA scores in the workshop conditions remained somewhat stable in comparison to the non-workshop students. From just after speech 1 to just after speech 2, students at Midwest U. (Group 3, extensive TA training) reported a sharp decline in PSA whereas students in the workshop condition at Appalachian U. (Group 2, basic TA training) reported stable levels of PSA. The conclusion from the data is that the workshop approach at Appalachian U. (Group 2) was less effective at reducing students' PSA than either the non workshop approach (Group 1) or the workshop approach used at Midwest U. (Group 3). Equally curious is the observation that students in the non-workshop condition reported the most consistent decrease in PSA and, in fact, reported the lowest level of PSA in comparison to the two workshop groups.

While we expected that student who engaged in peer workshops would have lower levels of PSA than students who did not, these findings suggest a different and more complex relationship. The Appalachian University group that did not use peer workshops (Group 1) had lower levels of PSA during speeches than either of
the workshop groups, even though all students began the course with similar levels of anxiety. It is possible that the peer workshops build peer expectations and/or place additional pressure on students to perform well because they do not want to disappoint their workshop group members who might also feel as though they have a stake in how well their peers perform.

However, the difference in the trends between the two groups that used peer workshops requires further analysis. We suspect that differences in the way that GTAs are trained, the resources and support provided, and the ways that workshops are described at each university account for some of the differences that we see. The GTAs who teach the students at Appalachian University who use workshops were given only a 30-minute introduction to peer workshops and were among a very small group of teachers who used peer workshops at their university. GTAs at Appalachian University self-selected into the workshop or no workshops group, and it is possible that there are other characteristics associated with the tendency to self-select into one group or the other that impact teaching. Moreover, GTAs who taught using workshops at Appalachian University were Ph.D. students who had prior experience teaching without peer workshops and were likely emphasized the workshops’ value in helping students earn better grades on their speeches. At the Midwest University, however, GTAs spend time during the training session before the beginning of the semester and two Power Hour (a required course that provides continued training on teaching public speaking) sessions during the semester learning about how to conduct peer workshops. Furthermore, all GTAs at Midwest University are M.A.
students and are required to use peer workshops, participate in a mock workshop before holding a workshop in their own class, and are usually teaching public speaking for the first time and do not have experience teaching without workshops. Moreover, the Basic Course Director places a heavy emphasis on using peer workshops to improve speech quality (as opposed to getting better grades). These differences might explain why, even if peer expectations keep anxiety levels a bit higher for the first speech, PSA drops substantially by the second speech to levels that are statistically the same PSA levels as were reported by students who do not participate in peer workshops.

Somewhat similar inconsistent findings were observed for the perceived classroom climate variable. Students’ perceived classroom climate scores generally showed improvement in each condition; however, the overall improvement for students in the Appalachian U. workshop group (Group 2, basic training) was much lower than for the Appalachian non-workshop group (Group 1) or the Midwest with workshop group (Group 3, extensive training). In fact, the Appalachian with workshop students reported that their perceptions of classroom climate improved at a similar rate as the other groups from the pretest to just after speech 1, but then reached a plateau and showed no improvement from just after speech 1 to just after speech 2; students in the other two conditions reported more meaningful positive gains in classroom climate after the first speech.

We suspect that the explanation for inconsistent effects on the classroom climate variable could be similar to that of the PSA variable. Because of differing levels of
initial and ongoing training as well as different expectations for how workshops were integrated, it is possible that teachers using the workshop approach at Appalachian U. were not able to capture the benefits of using workshops to the same degree as their peers at Midwest U., where this approach is much more ingrained.

Conclusions drawn from this study should be tempered by some of the limitations present in the design used. First, because this study was conducted in a naturalistic setting we could not control variables to the same degree as a true experiment. In fact, we suspect that the lack of control is precisely the cause for inconsistent findings between the two workshop conditions. While the benefits of doing field experiments are notable, the lack of control underscores the need for repeated replication before definitive conclusions can be drawn. Second, some caution should be used when interpreting changes in students’ speech grades. For a variety of reasons (including slight variations in speech assignments, inconsistent grading practices, etc.) one could assume that the two speeches are actually separate observations and lack the conceptual connection assumed by within-subjects designs. While we feel that there is some reason to link the two grades because they do represent probable changes in skill levels on the part of the students, the actual effects on skill cannot be split apart from any effects of those other contaminant variables. Thus, the changes reported here could inaccurately represent actual changes in students’ speaking skills. Finally, because of the design employed we were not able to integrate a wide variety of teachers. Thus, effects observed in this study are somewhat susceptible to the “intact group” criticism common to field experiments. Of
course, we did attempt to counteract this problem by ensuring that several teachers were represented in each group; yet, this problem cannot be entirely eliminated or controlled in any field experiment.

With those limitations leading to appropriate caution, we are encouraged by what we observed. Generally speaking, we found enough evidence to justify recommending that others explore the use of workshops in their public speaking programs. Although our data do not point to a definitive advantage for workshops in comparison to the conventional approach, they do show that workshops are a viable alternative pedagogical approach. And, as additional programs refine and test the use of workshops we may discover meaningful advantages for this approach with certain types of teachers (e.g., first year teachers) or certain types of students (e.g., students at risk of academic crisis or students who fall within a particular age range). Consequently, we encourage others to join with us in further exploring the integration of workshops in the basic course.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this study underscores the need for more instructional communication research to include multiple universities and multiple data collection points. If we had included students from only one university and had included only one or two data collection points in this study, we would have had a familiar research design and a cleaner data analysis that would have lent itself to much clearer conclusions. However, we also could not have seen the complexities that arose in this more robust design that forced us to temper many of our conclusions and allowed us to consider factors (such as resources and support for using peer workshops) that we would have otherwise
likely overlooked. These findings cause us to wonder whether other studies that find significant effects in single-university or two-group studies that use only one or two data collection points might have yielded more complex explanations of the variables investigated if additional universities, groups, or data collection points were included in the research design. As a research community, we should begin to collaborate on studies that use more complex research designs to test whether our assumptions about other variables hold true when examined in multiple contexts over time.

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Peer Workshops


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