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### Editorial Board

**David W. Worley**, Editor  
*Indiana State University*

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Historically, the basic oral communication course has been labeled “the bread and butter” of our discipline. This designation has been used to describe the economic and pedagogical importance of the basic course to the departments in which it is housed. Economically the basic course produces considerable revenue for institutions of higher education. Pedagogically, the basic course is often the gateway course to our discipline that students must complete to meet a graduation requirement; the course plays an important role in general education programs across the country. While the basic course is still often termed “the bread and butter” course, changes are afoot, as many who work in the basic course can testify. We are faced with new expectations, new budgetary constraints, new pedagogies, new foci, and new technologies that call for a rethinking of the basic course. Ongoing research focused on the basic course is fundamental to this rethinking. The Annual provides an important outlet for this research that encourages us to think carefully and critically about our work as basic course directors, teachers, and researchers.

This volume of the Annual offers food for thought to help us as we rethink the basic course. The various researchers who have contributed to this edition provide us with a rigorous and vigorous examination of impor-
tant issues including assessment, learning communities, peer workshops, grading consistency, and student evaluation. While some of these topics are well represented in basic course literature, the authors in this volume offer us fresh perspectives on these issues. I am sure you will find their work not only impressive research, but also valuable to your own thought and practice.

Although the editor of the Annual typically oversees three volumes, this will be the final volume of the Annual I edit. I want to thank all of you who have contributed to the two volumes for which I have been responsible. Additionally, I am deeply grateful to the reviewers whose diligent and excellent work truly makes a difference to basic course research and the Annual.

As you review this valuable research, I encourage you to share the news of the Annual with your students, colleagues, departments, and libraries. Many remain unaware of the good work readily available in this and past editions. As more new readers join our ranks, the Annual will continue to grow in quality and in readership, thereby ensuring an ongoing, unique contribution to our discipline.

David W. Worley
Immediate Feedback: A Means of Reducing Distracting Filler Words during Public Speeches

Michael Hazel, Colleen McMahon, Nancy Schmidt

Research demonstrates that immediate feedback is effective for speech instruction (King, Young & Behnke, 2000; Smith & King, 2004). However, feedback interventions can be a double-edged sword depending on the type of feedback and performance task (see Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Thus, given the mixed effects reported in feedback intervention research, the present studies examined an immediate feedback intervention aimed at reducing distracting filler words during public speeches in a classroom setting as well as how the intervention impacted state/trait anxiety and self-perceived communication competence. Results from study one indicate that immediate feedback effectively reduces filler word use during speeches in initial exposures and does not adversely impact state and trait anxiety, or self-perceived communication competence. Results from study two, in which immediate feedback was implemented over the duration of an entire course, demonstrate that in initial exposures, participants receiving immediate feedback used less than half the number of filler words as those not receiving immediate feedback during speeches. In addition, participants across all conditions reported significantly lower trait and state speech anxiety as well as significantly higher self-perceived public speaking competence. The peda-
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Bessie Lee Lawton, Mary Braz

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Kristen LeBlanc, Lori Vela, Marian L. Houser

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education status. A pretest-posttest design is utilized to determine whether students’ scores on cognitive, behavioral, and affective assessment instruments improve from the beginning to the end of the semester. Results indicate students’ scores improved on each of the primary learning indicators for the course including: an assessment of communication knowledge, conflict management skills, and intercultural communication apprehension. Discussion and implications for the basic communication course are included.

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Kevin R. Meyer, Stephen K. Hunt

Basic communication course instructors encourage student participation in the classroom by employing a variety of strategies, including graded participation. The present study examined the methods that basic course instructors use to facilitate and assess student participation in the classroom through focus groups interviews exploring how students perceive graded participation in the basic course. The findings suggest that while there are conditions in which the focus group students enjoy participation, there are also conditions in which they perceive such strategies as a power issue for instructors and reject the notion that participation accurately measures their level of involvement and learning in the classroom. Moreover, results indicate that students perceive instructor immediacy to be a significant factor in their willingness to participate. Finally, the focus group members offered several suggestions for instructors to better facilitate student participation in the classroom.
Tales of Teaching: Exploring the Dialectical Tensions of the GTA Experience ........................................ 127
Jennifer M. Hennings
In universities across the United States, an increasing number of departments are turning to graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to teach introductory courses. As GTAs assume a larger percentage of university teaching responsibilities, it becomes even more important to understand the tensions and challenges that GTAs face. The majority of research on GTAs focuses on the perceptions of students and GTA supervisors, and few researchers have talked directly to GTAs. This research fills that gap by studying the GTA experience from the GTA perspective. Using relational dialectics theory, this study identifies three key tensions that emerge from GTAs’ stories about role conflict and identity management: distance-closeness, perfect teacher-perfect student, and structure-freedom. Further, it analyzes the strategies GTAs use to manage and negotiate these tensions. After discussing the implications that these tensions have for GTAs and supervisors, the study offers suggestions for coping with tensions constructively. Finally, since these tensions can influence GTAs’ future careers as educators, this study concludes by considering the broader implications of these tensions for students and teachers.

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Katherine N. Kinnick, Emily Holler, Marla Bell
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dent and instructor perceptions. Subjects (n = 236, half of whom took the course in freshman learning communities and half in traditional sections) perceived the learning community as the preferable environment for public speaking, and students with greater speaking anxiety were more likely to self-select into learning communities. Perception, however, was not reality: Participation in a learning community made no measurable difference in terms of course outcomes of grades or decline in speaking anxiety. The findings challenge assumptions about the relationship between speaking anxiety and audience familiarity and friendliness. While the first-year learning community may benefit the institution as a whole with modest gains in retention, it does not appear to offer particular advantages to public speaking students. Indeed, it may isolate students with the weakest public speaking confidence levels and provide no opportunities for exposure to more seasoned students who can model appropriate college-level performance standards and classroom behavior. This study fills a gap in the literature about the impact of learning communities on the communication discipline, and adds insight to our knowledge of pedagogical approaches to reducing speaking anxiety.

The Effects of Using Peer Workshops on Speech Quality, Public Speaking Anxiety, and Classroom Climate .............................................. 220
Melissa A. Broeckelman-Post, B. Scott Titsworth, LeAnn M. Brazeal

This field experiment answered the call to explore alternative pedagogies in communication by testing the use of structured peer workshops in public speaking courses. Peer workshops use systematic and structured peer feedback to assist students in improving their
speeches. While strong theoretical reasons for using workshops have been advanced, and evidence from other disciplines suggest that they are effective, no research has specifically examined their use in public speaking. Results of our study show that peer workshops are a viable pedagogical option because they improve students’ speech grades, reduce public speaking anxiety, and improve perceptions of classroom climate. When comparing the use of workshops at two different universities, however, we observed inconsistent results which could be attributed to how workshops were integrated and supported.

Students’ Communication Predispositions:
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In Public Speaking Courses ........................................ 248
Robert J. Sidelinger, Scott A. Myers,
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The connected classroom climate centers on supportive student-to-student communication in the classroom, and may provide students enrolled in public speaking courses with a safe and comfortable haven to present speeches. This study examined student connectedness in public speaking courses and it’s affect on students’ (N = 368) communication abilities. Results revealed positive perceptions of student connectedness related to decreases in public speaking anxiety and public speaking apprehension, as well as increases in perceptions of communication competence. These outcomes suggest public speaking instructors should consider the relationships that exist among students and how they may further encourage connectedness in their classrooms.
Immediate Feedback: A Means of Reducing Distracting Filler Words During Public Speeches

Michael Hazel
Colleen McMahon
Nancy Schmidt

In the past half century, the importance of effective public speaking as part of a basic communication course is evidenced both by its inclusion as a requirement in many universities across the country, and the growth in the number of students seeking communication as a major of study. Because the act of public speaking involves the effective synthesis of a considerable number of communication components (e.g. well constructed content; organizational and rhetorical strategies; recall; eye contact; projection; oratorical style; management of communication apprehension), investigation into the best of ways of improving such competencies might run the gamut from studies that examine interventions targeting broad speech performance competencies (Ayres & Heuett, 1999), to more focused teaching strategies (e.g. Ayres & Schliesman, 1998; King, Young & Behnke, 2000; Selinow & Treinan, 2004; Smith & King, 2004) aimed specifically at micro-skill components like preparation, delivery, and instructor feedback processes. King et. al., for example, found that providing delayed feedback to students is more effective if the speech component task required effortful mental processing (e.g. developing an organizational format and incorporating re-
Immediate Feedback

search), while immediate feedback was more effective if the speech task was automatic (e.g. rate of speech, eye contact.) Since instructor feedback is an essential component of effective instruction (Smith & King), instructors who are knowledgeable in the most effective ways of delivering feedback in public speaking courses may have greater success as teachers. This assertion is buttressed by the findings of Kluger and DeNisi (1996), who conducted a meta-analysis of research focused on feedback interventions (FI) and their impact on performance. They found that in 1/3 of the completed FI research studies, feedback interventions produced detrimental effects on performance. Specifically, interventions that focused on meta-tasks (those which drew focus to themselves thereby diverting cognitive resources from specific behaviors) attenuated performance, while interventions that focused on specific performance tasks enhanced performance.

Given these findings, examination of the impact of feedback style for one aspect of the speech giving process may serve to enhance the effectiveness of an overall approach to effective public speaking instruction. Specifically, this study examines in-class interventions designed to provide immediate feedback to students who struggle with the problems of overuse of filler words during speeches.

**Filler Words in Public Speeches**

Many contemporary communication texts (e.g. O’Hair, Stewart & Rubenstein, 2004) advocate an extemporaneous style of delivery for most public speaking
occasions. That is, student speakers are encouraged not to read from a script or memorize, but rather to employ a style of language and delivery that resembles a polished conversation (Caputo, Hazel, McMahon & Dannels, 2003). As such, the occasional use of filler words, or vocalized pauses, such as um, uh, like, and you know may serve a valuable rhetorical purpose by communicating spontaneity and a natural conversational style. According to O'Connell and Kowal (2005), “Rhetoric makes a virtue of all the hesitation phenomena by deliberately employing silent pauses, repeats, prolongations, uh and um... with a view to effectively influence listeners” (p. 557). However, excessive or unconscious use of fillers may become distracting and diminish a speaker’s effectiveness. Additionally, anecdotal evidence suggests that many students, as part of the current generation of millennials, often intersperse “likes” and “ums” in conversational communication with considerable frequency, and such sociolinguistic patterns carry over into more formal speech settings.

The study of the meaning and function of the words um, uh, like, and you know has produced mixed findings. Clark & Fox Tree (2002) demonstrated that um and uh are conventional English words which signal hesitation or delay. However, O’Connell and Kowal found that um and uh are not necessarily reliable indicators of upcoming delay and the “basic meanings” (p.574) of these words are ambiguous and warrant further study. Fox Tree (2007) reported that lay people generally attribute um and uh as speech production trouble, you know as a type of speaker-listener interaction, and like (e.g. I like went to the store) as eluding clear definition (p. 299). Public speaking texts (e.g.
O’Hair, Stewart & Rubenstein) typically advocate awareness and minimal use of filler words because of their distracting nature, and this notion has empirical support. According to Chaney, Green, & Cherry (2005) corporate trainees reported that the repeated use of filler words was the most annoying or distracting presenter behavior among 13 commonly recognized distracting behaviors. Thus, investigation of classroom interventions specifically targeting distracting filler words serves a valuable purpose for both students and instructors in public speaking courses and leads to the following research question:

RQ 1: How are speakers’ use of filler words during speeches impacted by immediate feedback timing?

Given the demonstrated effectiveness of immediate feedback on automatic speech tasks (Smith & King; Kluger & DeNisi), it was expected that students exposed to an immediate feedback intervention would use fewer filler words during speeches than students exposed to a placebo or no immediate feedback intervention. For the purposes of creating an intervention easily adapted to a classroom setting, the immediate feedback intervention involved signaling a student by dropping a penny into an aluminum tea container right after the speaker vocalized a filler word during a speech. The theoretical rationale for this intervention was based on classical and operant conditioning (see Kirsch, Lynn, Vigorito, & Miller (2004) for a contemporary perspective on classical and operant conditioning.) That is, the intervention strategy stems from the notion that the use of an immediate “signal” that an undesired behavior has occurred
Immediate Feedback

will, over time, decrease the likelihood that the undesired behavior will continue to occur. Students also learn this vicariously by observing other students “signaled” after using filler words. According to Kirsch, Lynn, Vigorito and Miller (2004), “There is now virtually universal agreement that conditioning involves the production of expectancies” (p. 3). Thus, when the student speaker utters any of the undesirable filler words, the expectation will be that a penny will be dropped into the jar. Over time, the speaker becomes conditioned to expect that the penny will drop and will avoid the use of the filler words in order to avoid the signal.

FEEDBACK STYLE, ANXIETY AND SELF-PERCEIVED COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Past investigation (e.g. Chesbro & McCroskey, 2001; King & Behnke, 1986; Smith & King) of the impact of instructional feedback has focused on learner affect and anxiety. Smith & King, (2004) found that participants receiving immediate feedback on specific speech tasks reported significantly higher affect than delayed feedback or control conditions, but no significant differences in state anxiety levels. Ayres (1997) found that communication apprehension could be predicted by levels of fear of negative evaluation and self-perceived communication competence. Green, Rucker, Zauss, and Harris (1998) demonstrated that highly anxious individuals had slower skill acquisition and more performance variability than people with low anxiety (p. 345). Given these findings, an in-class intervention offering immediate feedback on graded speeches delivered in front
Immediate Feedback

of peers and an instructor may not be effective if relevant affective and cognitive states are adversely impacted. Specifically, an intentional and prominent focus on filler words signaled by clinking coins during a live speech in front of an audience might lead to increased anxiety and decreased self-perceived communication competence. Therefore, the following research question is advanced:

RQ 2: How will an in-class, immediate feedback intervention affect participants' levels of trait and state speech anxiety, and self-perceived communication competence?

METHOD

Participants

One hundred seventeen students enrolled in a required basic hybrid public speaking/introduction to communication course at a moderately-sized private university served as participants in this study. Students had the option of refusing to participate as outlined in the consent form, and safeguards for welfare and confidentiality were approved by the university’s institutional review board. Fifty-three percent of the students were female and the students ranged in age from 17 to 33 with an average age of 18.7 years. In order to best simulate a natural classroom environment, the participants’ course sections were randomly assigned to the treatment procedures, which were integrated into the course content.
Instruments

Trait Speech Anxiety

The Audience Anxiousness Scale (AAS) (Leary, 1983) is composed of twelve items and directs respondents to indicate “the degree to which each statement is characteristic or true of you” on a five point scale (1-not at all, 2-slightly, 3-moderately, 4-very, and 5-extremely). The measure assesses self-reported social anxiousness in the presence of an audience. Leary (1983) argues that the audience anxiety scale is a more comprehensive measure of CA in public speaking situations than the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (Levine & McCroskey, 1990). The AAS has demonstrated construct and criterion validity, good test-retest reliability (.84) and consistent inter-item reliabilities (.88) and (.91) (Leary, 1983, p. 70). In this study, the alpha reliability was .89 in the first admission, and .91 in the second admission.

State Speech Anxiety Inventory, A-State

The State Anxiety scale (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970) is a five-item Likert-type instrument designed to tap state communication apprehension. Research indicates that this scale has reasonable reliability and validity (McCroskey, 1984). In prior research, alpha levels have been reported at .83, .86 (Ayres, Hopf, & Will, 2000), and .94, .94 (Ayres, Wongprasert, Silva, Story, Hsu, and Sawant, 2001). Alpha reliabilities in the present study were .86 in the first admission, and .91 in the second admission.
**Self-Perceived Communication Competence**

Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) was measured using the Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). This 12 item scale asks respondents to indicate their perceptions of their own competence in four communication situations (public speaking, stranger, acquaintance, and friend communication) anchored in a scale of 0 (totally incompetent) to 100 (competent). In previous work (Richmond, McCroskey & McCroskey, 1989), the overall SPCC instrument has demonstrated acceptable reliability of .93. In the present study, the total SPCC yielded an alpha of .89 in the first admission and .94 in the second admission. The public speaking sub-scale alpha reliabilities were .83 in the first admission and .78 in the second admission.

**Data Gathering and Procedures**

Instructors were two professors, who were also the researchers, each teaching three sections of the required basic course. In order to control for instructor effects the professors each taught one section of the immediate feedback, placebo, and control conditions (that is, each condition) an equal number of times. However, during the course of the study, one of the professors took a leave of absence and two experienced adjunct instructors served as substitutes for her class sections. These instructors were not informed as to the nature of the study and were trained in the specific protocols for the appropriate treatment conditions. The study conditions were designed to mirror each other and reduce demand
characteristics by using the same treatment protocols, assignment descriptions, and scoring rubrics in all sections.

**Treatment Conditions**

*Immediate Feedback Experimental Condition.* The intervention was developed and refined a semester before the study commenced. Before the first informative speech, delivered early in the semester, the instructor explained the procedures of the feedback treatment. That is, during student speeches trained student assistants were instructed to drop a penny in a jar within 1 to 2 seconds each time after the speaker uttered any of the following filler words: “*um*”, “*uh*”, “*like*” and “*you know*.” The use of signals to indicate a particular speech behavior is not unusual (e.g. Toastmasters.) The assistants were informed when the words “*like*” and “*you know*” were contextually and grammatically appropriate and not considered filler words. In addition, the instructor kept a tally of the number of filler words on the student’s speech outlines for recording and feedback purposes. Students filled out the instruments immediately after the completion of the speech. After completing the first round of speeches, students received their grades with feedback and were informed that they would be delivering the same speech again. (This allowed for control of speech length and type.) The procedures for the second round of speeches mirrored the first.

*Placebo Condition* Participants in this condition were exposed to the same protocols above except that the pennies were dropped only when the speaker’s rate became too rapid during the speech.
Immediate Feedback

Control Condition. This condition adhered to above procedures except that no immediate feedback of any kind was given during the speeches.

Design and Analysis

This study employed a non-equivalent control group design involving an experimental group exposed to an immediate feedback intervention targeting filler words, a placebo condition where the immediate feedback intervention targeted a different speaking behavior (rate of speech), and a control condition. Number of filler words used, and the state and trait anxiety and self-perceived communication competence scales served as the dependent variables. The scores on first instrument admission and filler word count on the first speech served as the covariates for the multiple analysis of covariance analysis.

RESULTS

The multiple analysis of covariance yielded no significant results $F(10, 196) = .91, p > .05$ for the treatment conditions. Accordingly, no follow-up ANCOVA procedures were applied to any of the dependent variables. In addition, Box’s test of equality of the covariance matrices yielded significant results $F(30, 29610) = 4.09, p < .001$, indicating unequal covariance in the dependent variables. A follow-up Levene’s test for equality of variance was significant for the filler word variable $F(2,105) = 4.6, p < .05$ only. Table 1 presents pre and
Immediate Feedback

posttest means and standard deviations for all measures.

Given the resulting means and standard deviations reported in Table 1, we conducted a follow-up multiple analysis of variance of the first speech variables only. The MANOVA yielded significant results $F (10, 212) = 2.13, p < .05$. Follow-up ANOVAs indicated that the filler word dependent variable was significant $F(2, 113) = 10.0, p < .001$. Post hoc tests (Dunnett T3 for unequal

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N=36 in immediate feedback condition, 27 in placebo condition, and 45 in control conditions.
variances) indicated that participants in both immediate feedback conditions had significantly lower filler word use than the control condition in the first round of speeches, but the experimental and placebo conditions did not differ from each other. No significant differences emerged for any of the self-report variables.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this study confirm an association between the use of feedback interventions during speeches and reductions in the use of filler words. That is, students receiving immediate feedback in the experimental and placebo conditions used a significantly lower number of filler words than students who received no immediate feedback in the first round of speeches. In fact, students in the control group used over three times as many filler words as participants in the experimental condition, and over twice as many fillers as participants in the placebo group. While no significant differences in filler word use were indicated in the MANCOVA analysis, most likely due to the non-constant variance differences between the control condition and placebo and experimental groups (see Neter, Kutner, Nachtsheim, and Wasserman, 1996), practical differences did emerge. That is, in the second round of speeches, while participants in the control condition reduced the average use of filler words by 60%, they still used almost three times as many fillers as the experimental group. Somewhat unexpectedly, no differences emerged between the experimental and placebo conditions. It appears that as a function of almost simultaneous, task-specific feedback
present in the immediate feedback conditions, students are more vigilant about performing well across a variety of speech delivery skills. Of equal significance, the study indicates that trait and state speech anxiety and self-perceived communication competence are not adversely impacted by the use of the immediate feedback intervention as no significant differences among these variables emerged from the treatment conditions.

That the control group also reduced the use of fillers by 60% from the pre to post test speech speaks to the value of the delayed feedback that most students receive as part of their experience in public speaking courses. While the immediate feedback treatment appears effective in combination with delayed feedback, the impact of immediate feedback applied over the duration of an entire course warrants further investigation. One might suspect, for example, that filler word reductions might be more dramatic if immediate feedback was used by instructors throughout the semester.

**Study Two**

Since study one provided evidence that immediate feedback is significantly related to reductions in the use of distracting filler words in an initial exposure, it was decided to see if such feedback integrated over the duration of a public speaking course might have a greater degree of impact on filler word reductions than just two speeches. In addition, as no baseline measurements of self-reported trait, state, and self-perceived public speaking competence were gathered in study one prior to exposure to the intervention, we decided to investi-
gate the impact of initial exposure to the immediate feedback intervention. Thus, the following research questions were advanced:

RQ 1: How is the speaker use of filler words during speeches impacted by immediate feedback timing when integrated over the duration of a public speaking course?

RQ 2: Consistent with study one, will exposure to an in-class, immediate feedback intervention over the duration of an entire course have negligible effects on participant’s reported levels of trait and state speech anxiety, and self-perceived communication competence?

**METHOD**

This study employed a non equivalent control group design involving an experimental group exposed to the immediate feedback intervention targeting filler words over the course of a number of speeches, and a control condition, where the speeches were evaluated without immediate feedback.

**Participants**

Upper division undergraduate communication majors (N = 36) enrolled in two sections of a required advanced public speaking courses at a mid-size private university served as participants in the study. Sixty-seven percent of the students were female and participants ranged in age from 19 to 49 with an average age
Immediate Feedback

of 21.5. Students responded to a questionnaire three times during the course of the semester: once, on the first day of the course, again after the first major speech, and finally after the last major speech. The order of the forms was systematically varied and there was a multiple week time period between each distribution of the questionnaire. Students were informed of the confidential and voluntary nature of the study.

Instruments

Trait Speech Anxiety

As in study one, the Audience Anxiousness Scale (AAS) (Leary) was used to tap trait speech anxiety. In this study, the alpha reliability was .90 in the initial administration, .88 after speech one, and .79 after speech two.

State Speech Anxiety Inventory, A-State

The State Anxiety scale (Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene) was used to assess state speech anxiety. Alpha reliabilities in the present study were .89 in the initial administration, .86 after the first speech, and .91 after the second speech.

Self-Perceived Communication Competence

Self-Perceived Communication Competence (SPCC) was measured using the Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale (McCroskey & McCroskey). In this study, the total SPCC yielded an alpha of .89 in the first administration, .89 after speech one and .88 after
speech two. Public speaking subscale alphas were .75, .68, and .61 respectively.

**Instructors**

Instructors were two professors, who were also the researchers, each teaching a section of a required advanced public speaking course. The courses were designed to mirror each other by using identical syllabi, course progression, assignment explanations, and scoring rubrics. The classes were randomly assigned to either the experimental or normal class condition.

**Treatment Conditions**

*Experimental Condition.* On the first day of class, students filled out the questionnaire in order to obtain initial measurements (henceforth referred to as time 1) of the self-report measures. As no speeches were delivered on the first day of class, no tallies of filler words were compiled. The immediate feedback intervention and data gathering procedures mirrored the experimental condition in study one. However, after the first informative speech and questionnaire distribution (henceforth referred to as time 2), the intervention was used during ensuing speech and feedback sessions over the duration of the course. Towards the end of the semester, after students had delivered a number of different speeches, students again delivered the same informative speeches (in order to control for speech length and type) (henceforth referred to as time 3) and again filled out the questionnaire. Over the course of the semester, in addition to the use of the “um jar,” the instructor pro-
vided other teaching methods designed to reduce the use of distracting filler words. First, evaluation rubrics had a grading category for filler words and feedback included a tally of the number of filler words uttered during their speeches as part of the instructor feedback. Secondly, at periodic times during the semester, the instructor employed a commonly used practice exercise designed to help students become more cognizant of their use of filler words. In these exercises, students sat in a circle and generated impromptu speech topics. Then each student had to speak for a minute on one of the topics and the number of filler words spoken during the minute was tallied and reported to the student. During these impromptu sessions, the “um jar” was also employed. Thus, the immediate feedback intervention was integrated into formal and informal speaking assignments as part of the course content.

**Control Condition.** This condition adhered to how the course is normally taught during the semester. That is, this condition mirrored all of the above procedures with the exception of the use of the immediate feedback intervention. Thus, students were provided with delayed feedback and there was no integration of immediate feedback during the course.

**Analysis**

A series of MANCOVA procedures were employed to assess between groups differences. In the first analysis, MANCOVA procedures with initial baseline self-report measurements (time 1) serving as the covariates and the self-report (time 2) measurements serving as dependent variables were employed to assess the impact of
initial exposure to the treatment. In the second MANCOVA procedure, the number of filler words used, and the state and trait anxiety and self-perceived communication competence scales administered after time 2 served as the covariates, and the time 3 measurements served as the dependent variables.

**RESULTS**

The multiple analysis of covariance yielded no significant results when the initial measurements were used as the covariates and the time 2 measures served as the dependent variables $F(2, 22) = 1.61, p > .05$ for the treatment conditions. Accordingly, no follow-up univariate procedures were applied to any of the dependent variables. When the time 2 variables were used as the covariates and the time 3 means as dependent variables, the MANCOVA yielded no significant differences $F(4, 21) = .577, p > .05$. Table 2 presents pre and post test means and standard deviations for all measures.

As in study one, based on the non-significant differences reported in the MANCOVA, we conducted a follow-up multiple analysis of variance of pre-test variables only. The MANOVA also yielded no significant results $F(4, 27) = 1.45, p > .05$. Box’s test of equality of the covariance matrices yielded significant results $F(10, 4135) = 2.683, p < .003$, indicating unequal covariance in the dependent variables. A follow-up Levene’s test for equality of variance was significant for the filler word variable $F(1, 33) = 4.21, p < .05$ only, consistent with study one.
**Immediate Feedback**

Table 2

*Initial Test (Time 1), Speech One (Time 2), and Speech Two (Time 3) Means and Standard Deviations across Four Dependent Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Initial Test</th>
<th>Speech One</th>
<th>Speech Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M  SD</td>
<td>M  SD</td>
<td>M  SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Filler Word use</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate Feedback</td>
<td>3.21 2.76</td>
<td>.82 1.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>8.06 10.2</td>
<td>1.54 1.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience Anxiety</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate Feedback</td>
<td>34.02 8.9</td>
<td>33 9.3</td>
<td>28.6 7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>34.35 9.8</td>
<td>37.8 8.0</td>
<td>31.7 5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State Speech Anxiety</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate Feedback</td>
<td>17.3 4.4</td>
<td>14.9 4.8</td>
<td>9.9 4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>16.6 4.6</td>
<td>16.0 4.4</td>
<td>13.4 4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Perceived Public Speaking Competence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate Feedback</td>
<td>82.9 16.9</td>
<td>84.7 13.2</td>
<td>91.3 7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>79.4 13.1</td>
<td>83.2 10.1</td>
<td>89.2 7.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=17 in immediate feedback condition, and 15 in control condition.

Since no statistically significant between group differences emerged from the multivariate analysis, we conducted within groups procedures on all measures with a Bonferroni correction to control for familywise error rate (Wilk’s Lamda critical F probability values were adjusted from .05 to .01). Results indicated all measures significant beyond the .001 level. Participants used significantly fewer filler words in speech two than speech one $F(1,33) = 13.04 p <.001$, eta-squared = .283. Trait audience anxiety differences were also significantly different $F(2,30) = 16.34 p <.0001$, eta-squared = .52. Bonferroni post hoc analyses revealed that time one
and two measurements indicated significantly higher anxiety than time three, although times one and two did not differ from each other. State speech anxiety was also significantly different $F(2,29) = 23.63$ $p < .0001$, eta-squared = .62. Post hoc procedures indicated that all three measurements were significantly different from each other with initial test measurements higher than speech one, and speech one measures higher than speech two. Self perceived public speaking communication competence was also significantly different $F(2,31) = 8.96$ $p < .001$, eta-squared = .366. Post hoc analyses indicated that time one and two measurements were not significantly different from each other but both were significantly lower than time three. Means and standard deviations for all values are reported in table 3.

Table 3
Initial Test (Time 1), Speech One (Time 2), and Speech Two (Time 3) Means and Standard Deviations for Combined Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Initial Test</th>
<th>Speech One</th>
<th>Speech Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filler Word Use</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>7.58</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience Anxiety</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>8.54</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Speech Anxiety</td>
<td>17.51</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>15.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Perceived Public Speaking Competence</td>
<td>80.63</td>
<td>15.63</td>
<td>83.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

The purpose of these studies was to explore the effectiveness of immediate feedback interventions targeting excessive filler word use in speech class settings as well as assess the potential impact of such procedures on trait and state speech anxiety and self-perceived public speaking communication competence. Results from study one indicate that state and trait speech anxiety and self-perceived communication competence are not significantly associated with or adversely impacted by the use of the immediate feedback intervention. In addition, the statistical results in study one support the notion that immediate feedback is effective in reducing distracting filler words in initial exposures. The means and standard deviations of filler word use in study one supports the premise that students exposed to immediate feedback use considerably fewer filler words and show much smaller within group variation than students receiving no immediate feedback, regardless of whether or not the feedback is specifically targeting filler word use. While no statistically significant differences emerged when examining speech two measurements, with speech one values as covariates, it is likely that within group variation (see Neter et. al, 1996) contributed to the no significant difference findings in study one. For example, even though the mean score for filler word use was over double that of the immediate feedback placebo and experimental conditions in both speeches, and standard deviations of the control group were also considerably higher in the control group than either of the immediate feedback conditions, the statistical differences were non significant. While a typical
remedy for Type II error is to increase sample size, it is unlikely that such an adjustment would be effective in future replication studies. As evidenced by the reported standard deviations, there were considerably more extreme values in the delayed feedback only control condition. One student in the control condition, for example, uttered 62 disfluencies in the first speech and over 100 in the second. Such extreme values make it more difficult for the statistical procedures to detect significant differences, and these variations are highly likely to be present in actual classroom settings.

Since the data in study one indicate no harmful effects of employing this immediate feedback intervention and result in a considerably lower number of filler word use in conditions employing immediate feedback, this study offers evidence that these procedures can be effectively adopted into public speaking class settings. Follow-up qualitative anecdotal evidence provided by students involved in study two demonstrated considerable support for the positive impact of the “penny jar.” Many students reported that they are more aware of their own use of language in multiple contexts, and now notice more when others use distracting fillers in speeches and conversations. As such, we recommend that instructors encourage but not require immediate feedback in public speeches. Another interesting finding of study two was the significant reduction of reported trait and state anxiety and increase in self-reported speech competence across all conditions. This finding is encouraging for instructors of basic public speaking courses and speaks to the benefits such courses provide to college students.

Several limitations of this study warrant discussion. First, in study one, a professor had to take a leave of ab-
sence and was replaced by adjunct instructors who completed her sections of the study. While we were careful about adhering to consistent protocols in the design and implementation of the study, and the substitute instructors were not aware of the research questions, this change may have introduced some systematic variance. In addition, in study two each instructor ran a different condition. Again, while procedures were designed to be consistent throughout the conditions, this dynamic may have introduced systematic variance that affected the results. Finally, in study two a greater number of participants in each condition might have provided more power to detect differences. Means and standard deviations of the filler word use variable in both studies suggest possible type II error and a larger sample size may serve to provide more power to detect these differences.

Overall, the use of immediate feedback during public speeches appears to be a non-threatening and useful way to enhance public speaking competencies in students. Future studies may want to investigate the direct and concomitant benefits of providing task specific immediate feedback on elements of public speaking delivery like eye-contact, projection, or body movement. In study one, for example, targeting rate also appeared to lower the use of speech fillers. More work in this area is warranted, but the evidence presented in this study indicates that immediate feedback is a fruitful method for improving public speaking instruction.
REFERENCES


Immediate Feedback


Immediate Feedback


Many colleges and universities offer a basic communication course for undergraduate students. These courses could be a hybrid public speaking and interpersonal/mass/organizational class, or they could be general education courses that have a public speaking orientation (Pensoneau-Conway, Maguire, & Paal, 2007). Engleberg, Emanuel, Van Horn, and Bodary (2008) report that when they surveyed 290 community colleges, 82.1% of respondents who had general education communication courses said the course had a public speaking focus. As departments increase the number of sections for the same course, they have had to hire adjuncts and graduate teaching assistants to supplement the regular faculty (Turman & Barton, 2003, Sawyer & Behnke, 1997). One important question to ask, therefore, is whether these instructors have acceptable levels of similarity in course content and grading.

Institutions have resorted to the standardization of courses to try and make sure the learning experience is

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1 This paper won Top Paper award in the Basic Course Division during the Communication Association Conference in November 2009
the same or close to the same for its students. In the effort to standardize, communication departments have used one or more of the following for general education courses: a common textbook, a common syllabus, common speech requirements, and common evaluation forms. Researchers have criticized the trend toward standardization, explaining that it takes away teacher autonomy and assumes that the same educational experience can be had by diverse students (Morreale, et al., 2006; Zompetti, 2006, Pensoneau-Conway, et al., 2007). Nevertheless, Pensoneau-Conway et al. (2007) argue that the trend is toward standardization because institutions have to justify the budget allotted to these general education requirements, which means the courses regularly go through some form of assessment. One of the components of assessment involves tracking student grades as a measure of student learning (Pensoneau-Conway et al., 2007). Often, course grades include an objective component (exams) and a subjective component (speech performance).

The issue of consistency in grading among teachers with diverse experience levels and backgrounds is problematic. For example, Engleberg, Emanuel, Van Horn, and Bodary (2008) mention that some faculty members teaching communication do not have degrees in communication. Instead, they hold degrees in English (61%) or theatre (53%), and have limited background in teaching basic communication courses. They also state that 76% of responding colleges had more part-time than full-time faculty. Anderson and Jensen (2002) report that inexperienced raters tend to give higher grades regardless of speech level (A speech or C speech). Thus, varying levels of experience and backgrounds raise the
question of whether faculty are grading in a consistent manner.

**GRADING CONSISTENCY**

For decades, researchers have raised the issue of consistency in grading subjective performances such as a speech (Clevenger, 1962; Bostrom, 1968; Applbaum, Carroll, Robbins, & Stein, 1972; Littlefield, 1975; Goulden, 1990; Carlson & Smith-Howell, 1995; Behnke & Sawyer, 1998; Mottet & Beebe, 2006).

McNamara and Bailey (2006) describe how speech language pathology programs have developed portfolio-based assessments because the traditional assessment procedure of using direct observation to evaluate student performance assumed an unprejudiced judge, which quite often does not turn out to be the case. Turman and Barton (2004) mention three factors that could affect subjective judgments, namely: scoring procedures, assessment tools used, and rater bias. Of these three, the biggest source of error is rater bias. For example, Wade (1978) and Rubin (1990) found that teachers’ ratings of subjective work could be affected by student names, race, gender, handwriting, and the instructor’s perceived attractiveness of the student. Miller (1964) found that the instructor’s previous training and his/her attitude toward the topic affected how he/she rated a speech. Anderson and Jensen (2002) found that experience could even affect how instructors interpret evaluation forms.

Another issue that affects grading is whether raters use norm-referenced or criterion-referenced guidelines. Norm-referenced grading involves comparing the stu-
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dent with a given population. Behnke and Sawyer (1998) mention that students could be compared to national norms; however, a more likely reference group might be students who have taken the class in the last three years. This raises the question of what a new instructor would use as a reference in the absence of teaching experience. Another form of norming might involve “curving” grades in a particular class. Thus, instructors could be told to give mostly B’s and C’s, and to reserve A’s and D/F’s for a small percentage of students. Standards would then vary from class to class even within the same institution.

Criterion-referenced grading involves grading a student on whether he has achieved a certain performance standard. In an effort to standardize grading, many departments use a common evaluation form that often contains content, organization, physical delivery, and vocal delivery components (Carlson & Smith-Howell, 1995). Anderson and Jensen (2002) concluded in their study of evaluation instruments and rater experience that evaluation forms that clearly specify criteria and have clear instructions are critical, especially for C speeches. Turman and Barton (2003) also emphasize that criterion-based grading is essential to reduce rater differences in grading. And Meyer, Kurtz, Hines, Simonds, and Hunt (2010), in their study on assessing preemptive arguments, state that having specific guidelines for instructors on how to use and interpret rubrics can help increase rater reliability.

Goulden (1992) discusses four classifications of how raters could assess. Criterion-referenced grading in common speech evaluation forms, in practice, would fall under Goulden’s first two models—atomistic and ana-
lytic assessment. These are considered more objective and therefore less subject (though not immune) to rater bias (Mottet & Beebe, 2006). Atomistic assessment looks at the presence or absence of a behavior. Analytic assessment does not just quantify presence or absence of the behavior, but rather, judges the quality of the behavior being evaluated. The question remains, however, as to what standard judges are using to evaluate the quality of specific behaviors. Most likely, they are drawing on their own experience with students, either overall or from the specific institution they are in. In this sense, the issue of norm-referenced judgment becomes relevant even in so-called criterion-referenced grading using analytic assessment.

The last two assessment models—holistic and general impression—are more normative, subjective, and therefore highly prone to bias (Mottet & Beebe, 2006). The holistic assessment model considers the performance components without grading them, and then comes up with a judgment on the overall quality of the work. Finally, general impression evaluations, the most subjective of these models, are not guided by common criteria but by the personal criteria of the rater.

In this mid-Atlantic university, instructors generally use the analytic assessment model. They evaluate student performance on each of the components on the common evaluation form as “excellent,” “competent,” or “needs improvement.” Components include organization (attention-getter, thesis, preview, main points, transitions, summary, clincher), content (adapts to audience, variety of supporting materials, source citations, language choice, and presentational aid), and delivery (appearance, eye contact, facial expression, gestures, notes,
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stance/movement, rate, volume, enunciation, conversational tone, confidence, and enthusiasm). They also give an overall grade, but the determination of this overall grade is highly subjective. What happens is that a student is judged on a variety of components, and his final score could be either a summation of individual component scores, or a more analytic judgment as to how many of these he has achieved at acceptable levels.

It could be argued that grading, even using clearly identified criteria, has some element of norming, because faculty members have to draw on their own judgments of student performance. Each instructor’s norms are often different from the others, based on factors such as length of teaching experience and the variety of institutions he or she has taught at. Institutions have considered different methods to reduce inconsistencies in grading practices. Sawyer and Behnke (1997) describe how computer document-modeling software has been successfully used to improve the quality of instructor feedback while reducing the time needed to generate it. Behnke and Sawyer (1997) state that regular meetings between instructors and basic course supervisors are often necessary to increase comparability among instructors. Rubin (1990) also underscores the importance of rater training. Carlson and Smith-Howell (1995) found that speeches could be “evaluated reliably and validly using different evaluation forms as long as the forms address the age-old constructs of content and delivery, (but) novices tend to grade more harshly and inconsistently than experienced evaluators at first” (1995, pp. 93-94). This implies that some form of training or “bringing up to speed” is necessary to increase grading
comparability among instructors with different experience levels.

Stitt, Simonds, and Hunt (2003) used a one-group pretest-posttest design to assess whether training improved inter-rater reliability among new graduate assistants using a criterion-based assessment rubric. Results showed increased reliability in scores after training. Institutions therefore train instructors to try and bring norms closer and reduce grade differences, but often, this is a one-time training event.

Therefore, questions remain as to whether regular training provides additional benefits with regard to reducing grade dispersions, and whether instructors who have several years’ experience teaching will benefit from continual training. Specifically, does it make sense to hold more than one training session at the beginning of the semester or year? At the National Communication Association meeting in 2009, the authors asked the audience how many training sessions were given to adjunct faculty or graduate teaching assistants teaching a public speaking course, and range of answers was from 0-1. Is there any benefit in terms of grading consistency if people receive more than one training experience? This study seeks to help answer this question.

**SELF-EFFICACY AND PERCEIVED NORMATIVE BEHAVIOR**

This study also looked at self-efficacy and perceived normative behavior because these are related to instructor performance. In the institution where this study was conducted, adjunct and new faculty members often talk
in meetings about how they were not sure whether their grading behaviors were in line with others. In other words, there was uncertainty regarding their own abilities (self-efficacy) and whether or not they were grading consistently with other instructors (perceived normative behavior). In addition, the institution was actively assessing the general education courses, and an important component of the assessment involved comparing student grades. If instructors are not grading in a fairly consistent manner, then comparisons across classes cannot be done.

Yilmaz (2009) explains that self-efficacy affects teacher performance in several ways. Teachers with high self-efficacy believe they can teach effectively, do their job willingly and affectionately, believe they can establish communication with and teach problematic students, and have high expectations for student success (p. 506). Young and Bippus (2008) mention that self-efficacy perceptions are related to anxiety and may influence subsequent behaviors toward the tasks required in one’s job. For example, it is related to perseverance, adaptability, and the degree of effort to teach more effectively. Thus, higher self-confidence is related to a desire to do one’s job even better. They state that graduate teaching assistants usually do not have high levels of confidence that they can do their jobs effectively, and present results of a three-day training program that increased “prosocial behavioral alternation techniques (p. 116).”

Likewise, perceptions of behavioral norms also influence people’s behavior. Sherif (1936) discussed norms as mutually negotiated rules that govern social behavior. These rules are shared belief systems surrounding a
particular behavior. As instructors develop perceptions about how other instructors are grading, they develop perceptions about behavioral norms surrounding grading. Outside grade-norming sessions, instructors are rarely given opportunity to form perceptions of how others are grading and whether or not they are grading consistently with others. Because norms are mutually agreed upon, communication is critical for perceptions of grading norms to form and to influence behavior (Latané, 1996). Instructors who are given the opportunity to discuss how and why they rendered certain grades should be more likely to develop perceptions of normative behavior surrounding grading. Thus, instructors who receive training should be more likely to feel as if they are grading consistently with others.

Given the importance of the issue of grading consistency in institutions that offer public speaking as a basic communication course, a grade-norming study was conducted in a mid-size Mid-Atlantic university that aimed to train public speaking instructors on speech grading and on the use of a common speech evaluation form. In this mid-Atlantic university, instructor training usually involved a general meeting before each semester to go over course policies, but there was no follow-up throughout the semester, and no conscious effort to provide continuous training to faculty. New instructors were therefore at a disadvantage and were left to learn as they went along. Many adjunct instructors in this university also taught at other institutions, and they have shared that there is no regular training provided in the other places, either. Thus, the issue of whether regular, continual training is needed remains critical
today with the institutionalized importance of assessment and accountability.

Another goal of the study was to explore whether the exercise improved instructors’ self-efficacy and group normative behavioral perceptions. Since the study is about grade norming, it makes sense to look at instructors’ perceptions of how they graded compared to others and their confidence in their ability to grade. It also makes sense to look at whether actual grades were related to normative behavioral perceptions. In other words, if instructors perceived that they were grading in a consistent manner with others, to what extent did the actual grades given reflect this perception? Therefore, instructors also answered an instrument on perceived self-efficacy and normative behavioral perception questions.

While training involved discussion of the evaluation form as well as how final grades are determined, this study focuses on grades given by instructors, not on how they rated specific components of the evaluation form. Because the goal of the training was to improve consistency in grading, instructors’ perceptions that they are grading in the same way, and self-efficacy perceptions, the study had the following hypotheses:

H1: Variance among scores given by members of the grade-norming group will decrease over time compared with scores given by members of the control group.

H2: Instructors in the training group will report increased perceived agreement over time for the way in which they grade compared with instructors who do not receive training.
H3: Normative behavioral perception of agreement with others will be positively associated with perceived self-efficacy of grading at each time period.

**METHOD**

**Design**

This study employed a 2 (training and non-training group) x 4 (four time periods) mixed groups design, with time as the within group measure and training group as the between groups measure. All data was collected anonymously in order to help minimize demand characteristics.

**Participants**

Fourteen public speaking instructors at a midsized university in the Mid-Atlantic served as participants in this study. Three of the instructors were men and 11 were women. Instructors had taught the public speaking course for an average of 11.07 semesters total (sd = 7.59) and for an average of 5.93 semesters at this particular university (sd = 3.20).

**Procedure**

The investigators explained the study during the beginning of the academic year orientation of Public Speaking instructors. The investigators then asked each one if they would be willing to take part. Everyone
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agreed, but self-selected into either experimental or control group depending on availability to attend training sessions, a caveat for interpreting the results. Because of this self-selection, it was important to check for comparability between groups. Independent samples t-tests were run to see whether there were differences in the mean scores given by each group for each time period. Results are presented in the measurement section that follows. The goal was to show that the two groups were comparable overall in how they graded. Results confirmed that there were no significant differences between training and control group in overall grading in any of the time periods. This starting point allowed us to focus on assessing grading dispersion between groups. There were seven participants in each of the training and the control group.

Treatment Group

Instructors in this group met four times over the course of a semester. Each meeting started out by having instructors evaluate two speeches independently using the departmental evaluation form, and then they filled out a questionnaire on perceived efficacy, group comparisons, and normative behavioral perceptions. The common evaluation form contained organization, content, and delivery components. Thereafter, a discussion ensued whereby members explained how they judged elements of the speech on the evaluation form, and why they gave the final grade they assigned. They discussed why each speech deserved the grade they gave. Therefore, they came to some agreement on what constituted an A versus a B, C, or D speech. The discussions lasted
from one to one-and-a-half hours. The goal at the end of the project was to have greater understanding of all elements of the evaluation form, as well as why other instructors gave the grade they did.

Participants were asked to evaluate videotaped speeches given by students in Public Speaking courses. Students signed a release form before giving these speeches. Four speeches were informative, and four were persuasive speeches. Instructors were asked to submit speeches, which were placed into a centralized library on the department website. The study investigators selected two speeches from four instructors’ sections for the study.

**Control Group**

Instructors in this group also evaluated the same two speeches independently on each of four time periods during the semester using the departmental evaluation form, and then they filled out the same questionnaire on perceived efficacy and normative behavioral perceptions. They did these four rounds at the same period that treatment group members were having their meetings. They did not have the benefit of any meetings or discussions with other instructors.

**Measurement**

*Graded Scores.* Participants graded two speeches in each of four time frames for a total of eight speeches. Grades were measured on a continuum ranging from 0 to 100. Graded speech scores were standardized in order to allow us to conduct analyses on dispersion rates. This
Instructor Grade Norming

step was necessary because we are not testing for differences in speech quality (some speeches might have been better than others, e.g. an “A” quality speech versus a “C” quality speech, and therefore deserving of a higher grade than others) but rather we were testing the degree of dispersion of scores around the mean score. Means and standard deviations for graded speech scores are reported by group in Table 1.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations
for Speech Grade by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Training Group</th>
<th>Non-Training Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech 1</td>
<td>80.29</td>
<td>5.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech 2</td>
<td>75.29</td>
<td>3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech 3</td>
<td>64.29</td>
<td>4.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech 4</td>
<td>78.14</td>
<td>3.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech 5</td>
<td>80.57</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech 6</td>
<td>66.14</td>
<td>5.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech 7</td>
<td>83.14</td>
<td>1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech 8</td>
<td>76.14</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Principal Components Analysis was conducted for each pair of grades at each time period to assess communalities. Factor loadings for each of the four time periods were >.72. Thus, standardized speech scores at each time period were summed and averaged to form an index of grades at each time period.

As noted previously, we checked whether there were differences in the mean scores given by each group for
each time period. This is important to show that the two groups were comparable overall in how they graded. Results confirmed that there were no significant differences between training and control group in overall grading. The purpose of the paper instead is to see whether trained instructors were grading more consistently over time by looking at the dispersion rates around mean scores.

The results of the t-tests indicated there were no differences between training and control group grade scores for any of the four time periods. Means, standard deviations, and test statistics are reported in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Training Group</th>
<th>Non-Training Group</th>
<th>T(12)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>77.79</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>80.14</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>71.21</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>69.36</td>
<td>5.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>73.36</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>77.93</td>
<td>7.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 4</td>
<td>79.64</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>79.43</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perceived Normative Behavior. We developed four items to measure the extent to which instructors believed they were grading consistently with other instructors at the university. Items included, “I gave the same grade to the speeches viewed today as the other instructors did,” “Other instructors’ comments about the speeches we viewed were very similar to my own,”
Instructor Grade Norming

“If we compared completed evaluation sheets for the speeches we viewed, mine would look just like everyone else’s,” and “Everyone here gave the same grade to the speeches that I gave.” These items were measured at each time period on a seven point scale, with higher numbers indicating greater perceived normative behavior. Confirmatory factor analysis was employed to assess internal consistency, and yielded RMSE <.10 for the four items at each time period. Thus, the indicators were summed and averaged to form a Perceived Normative Behavior Index for each time period. Means, standard deviations, and scale reliabilities for each index are reported in Table 3.

Table 3
Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for perceived normative behavior at each time period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 4</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Self-efficacy. In order to test the extent to which instructors exhibited increased self-efficacy over time, we developed eleven items to measure the extent to which instructors believed they could grade a speech fairly. Items included, “I’m sure I can do an excellent job evaluating student speeches,” “I feel confident that I can
fairly judge all items on the evaluation form,” “I feel confident that I can judge if a student cites sources properly,” and “I can tell if a speech is organized well.” These items were measured at each time period on a seven point scale with higher numbers indicating greater self-efficacy. Confirmatory factor analysis was employed to assess internal consistency, and yielded RMSE < .10 for the eleven items at each time period. Thus, the indicators were summed and averaged to form a Self-efficacy Index for each time period. Means, standard deviations, and scale reliabilities for each index are reported in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for self-efficacy at each time period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>6.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>6.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>6.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 4</td>
<td>6.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RESULTS**

All results are calculated using the within group score as the unit of analysis. For all tests, p < .05 was used as the significance level for significance testing.

Hypothesis One predicted agreement between instructors in the Training Group would increase over
time compared with that of instructors in the control group. To test this hypothesis, a Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance with Time as the within-subjects factor and Training Group as the between-subjects factor was conducted with training condition predicting graded scores at each time index. Results indicated that the cubic trend for both Time frame and the interaction between Time and Training Group emerged as significant predictors of the model, $F(1, 12) = 5.05, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .64$ and $F(1, 12) = 10.56, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .47$ respectively. Therefore, data were consistent with

![Graph 1: Standardized grade dispersion by group over time](image)
Instructor Grade Norming

the hypothesis. (See Table 1 for means and standard deviations. See also Graph 1 for standardized grade dispersions by group over time.)

Table 5

Self-reported perceived normative behavior indexes of each group over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Training Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>sd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 4</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis Two predicted that participants in the training group would report greater perception of agreement with other instructors as time went by when compared with the non-trained group. In order to test this hypothesis, a Two-way Analysis of Variance was employed to analyze whether time and condition interacted to predict normative behavioral perceptions. The data were consistent with the hypothesis, $F(7, 56) = 4.19, p < .01$. (See Table 5 for means and standard deviations for each group over time.) Post hoc analyses indicated individual perceptions of agreement with other instructors at Time One was significantly different from all other times, as were perceptions at Time 4, with scores at Time 4 higher and displaying a general increasing trend across time. Time also emerged as a significant predictor of perceived normative behavior, $F(3,$
56) = 6.18, \( p < .01 \), showing overall improvement for all instructors over time. Therefore, the improvement was significantly greater for the training group compared to the control group, which only exhibited a marginal increase over time. No other unanticipated effects emerged as significant. (See Table 5 and Graph 2 for perceptions of normative behavior over time.)
for normative behavior and self-efficacy. (For more information on means and standard deviations for self-efficacy over time, see Table 6 and Graph 3.) In order to

Table 6

*Reported self-efficacy of training and control group over time (Self-efficacy index)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Training Group</th>
<th></th>
<th>Control Group</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>sd</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>sd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 1</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>6.32</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2</td>
<td>6.24</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>6.38</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>6.43</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 4</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>6.51</td>
<td>.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Graph 3: Self-efficacy by group over time*
test this hypothesis, a step-wise multiple regression analysis was employed to predict self-efficacy. To control for training group, condition was entered in the first step of the regression and normative perceived behavior was entered in the second step. The overall model was significant $R = .77$, $F(1, 54) = 7.934$, $p < .001$. Normative behavioral perception did emerge as a significant predictor of the model, $b = .54$, $t(55) = 3.55$, $p < .01$.

**Discussion**

Given the call for instructor training from the field, this study was necessary to establish an empirical foundation for why training instructors continuously is important and how training affects instructor grading over time. Stitt, Simonds, and Hunt (2003) reported that one-time training increased reliability in grading among new graduate assistants. This study shows that regular training provides continued benefits in grading consistency even among instructors with several years of teaching experience.

Results indicated instructors in the training group became more consistent with their speech grades as time went on. The control group fluctuated over time in terms of actual grade consistency, though their dispersion from mean scores in the final time frame was almost identical to those in the initial time frame. The control and training groups also had very similar dispersions in the beginning, but by Time 4, the training group’s deviation from the mean scores was about half that of the control group’s even as their mean scores remained almost identical. In other words, data showed
that instructors in both groups graded similarly for each time period, but the training group had significantly less dispersion than the control group in Time 4.

In Hypothesis Two, we predicted instructors who received training would report an increase in levels of perceived agreement in the speech grade they gave compared with other course instructors at the university over time. Results indicated that training did make a difference over time. Both instructors who were trained and those who were not trained reported increased perception of agreement with other instructors over time, but those who were trained showed higher levels of perceived agreement with others in Time 4 compared with those who were not trained.

Perceived agreement with other instructors therefore increased at a faster rate for instructors who received training. One criterion for evaluation of general education courses is consistency in grading, but results of this study show that not only does training increase consistency in grading, training also increases perceptions of consistency between instructors. Perceptions of consistency are correlated with self-efficacy, which shows instructor confidence in their ability to teach (See Hypothesis Three results.) If part of an evaluation procedure is asking instructors directly whether they feel they are on par or meeting the same standards as their peers, results of this study would indicate instructors who have been trained would be more likely to respond affirmatively.

The control group reported slightly higher (though not significantly higher) levels of perceived agreement with other instructors in the initial time frame compared with the training group. In later time frames, the
Instructor Grade Norming

perceptions flip, with the training group reporting higher normative perceptions (See Graph 2). One possible explanation for the control group’s higher level in Time 1 was that they began the semester with slightly more teaching experience overall (M = 14.86, sd = 8.41) than the instructors in the training group (M = 7.29, sd = 4.54), though the difference was not significant, t (12) = -2.10, p<.ns. Also, instructors in the control condition had taught more semesters at this particular university (M = 7.43, sd = 3.10) than the instructors in the training group (M = 4.43, sd = 2.70), t (12) = -1.93, p<.ns. In spite of these advantages of the control group in terms of teaching experience, the training group performed better over time in terms of grading consistency and normative behavioral perception.

This switch in levels of normative perception is important because perceived agreement with other instructors, or the extent to which public speaking instructors think they grade a speech in a manner consistent with their colleagues, is correlated with self-efficacy (See Hypothesis Three results.). Confidence in one’s ability to teach and grade is a desirable goal for instructors. Results of this study indicate that trained instructors increasingly feel as if they are on the same page when it comes to assigning speech grades, and this perception increases as training goes on.

Hypothesis Three predicted that instructors’ increased perception of grading agreement with other instructors is related to increases in self-efficacy. The more instructors thought their speech evaluations were in agreement with other instructors, the greater their levels of self-efficacy were at all time periods.
One way to measure training effectiveness is to study whether it leads to an increase in how well instructors think they do their job as educators, insofar as that role is tied to grading consistently with other instructors is concerned. When instructors think they are consistent with their peers, they also think they are better able to do their jobs as speech evaluators.

**Implications**

The results of this study show that continual training provided benefits in grading consistency over time. Quite clearly, there is value in providing regular training to faculty members, both new and experienced. The subjects of this study were not new instructors; most had several years of experience teaching. It is important to have instructors who grade consistently to allow for comparability across classes, an important component of course standardization required of general education offerings. The question then becomes: at what point does added training stop providing increased reliability? This study was not able to answer this question, and it is listed as one of its limitations in the next section.

The ethical issue of fairness toward students is important to note here. One could ask, “Why bother,” if the average scores of the two groups were essentially the same for each time period. It is precisely because the two groups’ means were similar that the comparison of the grade dispersions could be undertaken. Overall, even if the control group mean was similar to the training group, their individual scores were more diffused. It would not be fair to have students in a class where the
teacher gives higher grades overall, and in another class where the teacher grades harshly, even if the average of the two instructors is the same as the rest of the faculty combined.

The study also showed that increased grading consistency in the training group led to higher levels of perceived normative behavior. Self-efficacy was shown to be related to perceived normative behavior. When one feels one is on the same page as other faculty members, self-confidence increases. As discussed in the literature section, higher levels of confidence lead to less anxiety and to proactive behavior to do one's job more effectively. One role of basic course directors is to provide support to instructors so they can do their job well. Continual training helped improve faculty perceptions that they were grading in a similar way with others, and this was related to higher levels of self-confidence. Training in this group setting may also help the basic course director manage time more efficiently, compared to one-on-one follow-ups with individual faculty. The director could stagger meeting times to accommodate faculty schedules so that each instructor could attend at least a few of the regular meetings. Behnke and Sawyer (1997) suggested that regular meetings between course directors and instructors could increase comparability. Group training meetings like that undertaken in this study is more time-efficient than one-on-one meetings, and provides the added benefit of increased self-efficacy and normative behavioral perceptions.

It is quite plausible that basic course directors might design alternative continuous training modes given the difficulty of finding common meeting times for instructors. For example, instructors might be asked to partici-
pate in an online course that would allow them to evaluate student videos and then view other faculty members’ grades and feedback. An online discussion forum might be set up to support this training and provide an alternative to face-to-face group conversations. It would be useful to assess whether this alternative mode would generate the same training results, not only in terms of increased grading reliability, but also in terms of perceived normative behaviors and self-efficacy.

**Limitations**

One limitation of the study was the quasi-experimental nature of the design. Faculty were allowed to self-select into control and treatment group, based on their availability to attend sessions. On one hand, this allowed us to have a quasi-control group to compare the training group against. On the other, we had to look closely at the comparability of the two groups. We therefore compared mean scores in the four time periods, and they remained similar for both groups. What changed was the dispersion or the consistency of grades in the treatment group. This is important because it showed that the training did not lead to grade inflation or deflation overall, but it led to a tighter set of scores around the mean for the training group. In other words, their grades became more similar to each other. The control group scores, while averaging the same, had wider fluctuations and therefore, less consistency with each other.

Another limitation is that the study stopped at four time periods. It is quite conceivable that there would be a point of diminishing returns when the reliability
gained would not be worth the extra effort and resources to bring faculty members together for training. This study was not able to answer that question, but it is worthwhile for future studies to establish this point.

**CONCLUSION**

Universities and colleges with basic courses undergo a great deal of assessment and need to demonstrate consistency across general education instructors. This study showed that longitudinal training over the course of one semester can help improve grading consistency among Public Speaking faculty. Regular training provides continued benefits that may not be achieved in one training session during the beginning of the semester, and also proves beneficial even to instructors who have several years’ teaching experience. Moreover, trained instructors showed higher levels of perceived normative behavior, which is correlated with higher levels of confidence that they can do their job well. As institutions have had to hire adjuncts and graduate teaching assistants to teach basic courses, it is worthwhile to invest resources to provide continual training sessions to help reduce the gap between experienced and inexperienced teachers more quickly, thus helping institutions achieve increased standardization in their basic course offerings.
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Improving the Basic Communication Course: Assessing the Core Components

Kristen LeBlanc
Lori Vela
Marian L. Houser

The introductory communication course remains a vital component in education at the collegiate level. Many higher education institutions are following a trend in which the basic communication course is a general education requirement of all students regardless of their academic focus (Cutspec, McPherson, & Spiro, 1999; Hunt, Novak, Semlak, & Meyer, 2005). In fact, according to a series of investigations conducted from 1968 to 2006, some form of the basic course (public speaking or hybrid version) is required for all students by a majority of institutions of higher education (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). However, with challenges in the economy, jobs at risk, record unemployment, and overall economic belt tightening, universities search for more effective ways to better draw students in and meet their needs. Though students remain the primary focus, the economic concerns trickle down to departments whose faculty begin scrambling to retain courses that have garnered their program’s success or kept them financially afloat and at the forefront of university general education requirements.

One way to ensure the vitality of the basic communication course is to exhibit its usefulness and success within the general education core which strives to offer
Assessing the Basic Course

every student attending the institution a well-rounded education intended to help them thrive in a rapidly changing world. A primary example that colleges, universities and communication departments are establishing this relevancy is by focusing on multiculturalism and diversity issues. In the 2006 basic communication course survey, approximately 71% of participating institutions reported valuing a strong focus on diversity issues (Morreale, et al., 2006). To retain general education status, the challenge then lies in the ability to provide evidence to administrators and accrediting agencies that course goals and objectives, such as a multicultural focus, are being met.

Though other means may provide evidence of student learning, assessment is a highly-valued method. According to the Principles of Accreditation within the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS; 2010) the focus on student learning outcomes is central to the accreditation review process. In other words, while multiple assessment methods such as curricular objectives and co-curricular goals’ evaluation are necessary and valuable, a primary focus has been placed on student learning outcomes. It is this data that is primarily used to evaluate and enhance courses and overall degree programs. With this in mind, the purpose of the current study is to utilize a case study approach as a way to examine an effective means of assessing student learning of objectives and goals set forth in the basic communication course in an effort to ensure that it not only retains its general education status but also enriches the course.
DEFINING THE BASIC COURSE

This research study focuses on a basic communication course at a large southwestern university. The course is currently a general education requirement for all students and must be completed in order to obtain an undergraduate degree. Entitled *Fundamentals of Human Communication*, the basic communication course is a hybrid course that provides instruction in the intercultural, interpersonal, small group, and public speaking contexts. It is designed in a lecture-lab format such that students attend lectures to receive course content while attending lab sessions for experiential learning and skill building. The course is taught by a combination of full-time faculty, adjunct instructors, and graduate teaching assistants.

Five specific general education outcomes focusing on cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains of learning have been established for the course. After completing this introductory course, students should be able to (1) List, describe, and explain the five principles of human communication and identify how they are integrated into the intercultural, interpersonal, small group/team, and presentational speaking contexts, (2) Analyze and appropriately manage interpersonal conflict by using the five principles of human communication, (3) Identify and describe appropriate adaptive messages in intercultural communication situations and demonstrate appropriate affective responses to intercultural communication interactions, (4) Develop, organize, and deliver an informative presentation, and (5) Deliver a persuasive presentation integrating the five principles into the presentation.
THE BASIC COURSE AT RISK

After being bantered about for several years, in 2007 the state legislature (representing the university in the case study) mandated that as of 2008, the hours required to earn a bachelor’s degree would be reduced from 128 to 120 hours. With this degree reduction, four-year institutions began scrambling to discover ways to manage this directive and be fair to all departments and degree programs. In response, a primary focus of the provost at the institution in the current case study was to encourage the General Education Council to reduce the university’s core curriculum from a 46 to a 43-hour core. If this was going to happen, at least one or two courses would face elimination. In addition, with university efforts to become a Hispanic-serving institution with at least 25 percent of full-time students being Hispanic (University News Service, 2010), the provost suggested that courses with a multi-cultural focus would be favored. The primary focus of the General Education Council’s near-weekly meetings in 2006 was where to make the cuts—if they were to be made. The basic communication course was one of several discussed during these meetings, prompting the chair and the basic course director to begin examining the educational objectives, goals and outcomes in efforts to retain its university-wide relevance and general education status.

Assessment in the basic communication course—*Fundamentals of Human Communication*—was nothing new. Pencil and paper tests examining student learning of the course’s primary principles had been examined for over 20 years. However, when the provost called upon the General Education Council to discuss possible
courses to be cut, it became clear that course objectives and the assessment instruments and procedures would need to be redefined. The initial focus was placed on developing a multi-cultural focus in the basic course. Topics of cultural diversity were infused within each textbook chapter and class lectures and laboratory discussions. If the focus was substantial and evident then assessing student awareness and understanding of different cultures should reveal this. The course would also have to provide evidence of cognitive and behavioral learning sufficient for the provost, General Education Council and the SACS accreditation review board.

THE BASIC COURSE AS A GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENT

In a longitudinal study examining the status of the basic communication course across the nation, Morreale et al. (2006) found that over half of the institutions that participated in the study confirmed that the introductory communication course is a general education requirement for their students. Many institutions require this course as part of the general education curriculum because it provides students with essential communication skills which, in turn, will enable them to be successful contributors to society (Kramer & Hinton, 1996). According to guidelines at the institution in which the current study was conducted, general education courses should provide students with “fundamental skills and cultural background that are the marks of an educated person” (Undergraduate Catalog, 2010-2012, p. 45). With the comprehensive content offered, “students per-
ceive the communication skills taught in basic interpersonal communication and public speaking courses to be useful and relevant for their future career” (Hunt, Ekachai, Garard, & Rust, 2001, p. 17). Thus, the authors in the current study examined specific aspects of the basic course which may enable it to remain a core component in the general education curriculum.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Assessing the Basic Communication Course**

Assessment remains a vital component in the instructional context and is an integral process in determining student success within the realm of academia. Assessing communication courses ensures that student learning is occurring and student learning outcomes are being achieved. Additionally, assessment practices are vital to the survival of the basic communication course examined in the current study as a general education requirement. The purpose of assessing the basic course is to provide evidence that the instruction received will increase students’ knowledge, improve students’ behaviors, and change students’ attitudes toward course content. Being able to statistically demonstrate that these changes are occurring will not only ensure that the basic course in the discipline survives (Beebe, Mottet, & Roach, 2004), but also affords it the opportunity to demonstrate distinct contributions to academia (Backlund & Arneson, 2000).

In order to effectively assess the basic communication course, chairs and basic course directors should be aware of the guidelines established by the National
Communication Association (NCA; n.d.) and Backlund and Arneson (2000). These guidelines encourage assessment programs to include all three domains of student learning—cognitive, behavioral, and affective—in order to provide evidence of holistic learning in the basic course. Additionally, they discuss that effective assessment teams should “(1) create clear objectives; (2) focus on oral communication; (3) create an effective program; and (4) redesign the plan as needed” (Backlund & Arneson, 2000, p. 93). Thus, the current case study is guided by the criteria set forth by NCA as well as Backlund and Arneson (2000) and attempts to justify the need for the basic course as a general education requirement. The end goal is to provide effective statistical evidence of the course’s success, specifically demonstrating improvement in scores on cognitive, behavioral, and affective measures of student learning.

**Assessing Intercultural Communication and the Basic Course**

As discussed previously, incorporating an intercultural dimension into the curriculum and assessment plan is vital to the retention of the basic course in the current case study. University administrators urge educators to include an intercultural dimension into the curriculum, as educational diversity becomes a primary focus of higher education (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). In the current study, the intercultural communication component plays a major role in the course’s status as a general education requirement. Therefore, the basic course director has
implemented an assessment measure of intercultural communication.

In the course’s textbook, *Communication Principles for a Lifetime*, Beebe, Beebe, and Ivy (2010) define intercultural communication as, “communication between people who have different cultural traditions” (p. 151). According to Funkhouser (1995), people engage in communication with those of various cultures on a daily basis, however few effectively utilize intercultural communication skills. Therefore, many institutions incorporate an intercultural component into the curriculum of the basic communication course. At least 71 percent of the colleges and universities in the country currently provide intercultural communication instruction as part of the basic communication course curriculum (Morreale et al., 2006).

In the current study, the basic course requires students to engage in lectures that provide course content about intercultural communication as well as participation in experiential learning and skill building activities. These activities are conducted in lab sessions geared toward improving students’ reduction of intercultural communication apprehension. The experiential learning activities specifically address ethnocentrism and awareness, as well as skills to help students adapt their communication when confronting individuals from other cultures. The students also participate in interactive activities that include paraphrasing and adapting message content in order to practice and improve these skills.

While intercultural communication is an important aspect of the pedagogy in the basic course, instructors must also create effective assessment measures to en-
Assessing student learning outcomes and justify it in the general education core. The assessment process is also vital in identifying areas for improvement in the basic course, such as the decision to implement and refine the intercultural content. Furthermore, assessment serves as a means to improve and enhance students’ intercultural communication skills after receiving instruction.

**Research Question**

Through the current case study the authors initially hope to discover whether student learning occurred in the basic communication course. Additionally, assessment instruments examining cognitive learning outcomes, conflict management skills, and intercultural communication apprehension are utilized to provide informative tools regarding improvements that can be made in the basic communication course to ensure greater student applicability. With these goals in mind the following research question was examined: *Did students improve on measures of cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of learning from the beginning to the end of a semester?*

**Methods**

**Participants**

Participants in the study consisted of 686 students, representing 25% of the entire student population enrolled in the basic course for the semesters utilized in
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the study. The demographic data of the participants was not specified. The students were enrolled in one large lecture section and smaller “breakout labs” within the basic communication course. The researchers utilized a convenience sampling technique to recruit participants for the study. The participants voluntarily completed the assessment instrument and were not given extra credit points or incentives for their contribution to the assessment process.

Procedures

A pretest-posttest design was utilized in the assessment process; therefore, two data collections occurred each semester. Instructors administered the pretest at the beginning of the semester before content instruction. The posttest was administered to the same group of students at the end of the semester. The students were asked to complete the pretest and posttest without utilizing their textbook or notes. The participants were asked to identify their pretests and posttests by marking them with their student identification number at the top of the page. At the end of the semester, the assessment team matched students’ pretests and posttests by using the students’ identification numbers. In order to ensure a large enough sample, data was collected over the course of two semesters. The pretest / posttest design was used to determine if a difference between the scores existed (Keyton, 2006).
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Instruments

To measure students’ cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning outcomes, the assessment instrument was divided into three sections, each consisting of a different measure. Cognitive learning was assessed with the Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment (See Appendix). The behavioral domain of learning was assessed with the Conflict Management Skills Assessment (Mottet, 2003), and the affective domain of learning was measured with the Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension, also known as the PRICA (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997).

Cognitive learning outcome assessment. The first instrument was developed by the basic course director to measure the cognitive component of student learning. This instrument was selected because it directly measures cognitive learning outcomes outlined in the course objectives. The cognitive learning outcomes focus on five principles of communication taught in the course including: 1) be aware of your communication with yourself and others, 2) effectively use and interpret verbal messages, 3) effectively use and interpret nonverbal messages, 4) listen and respond thoughtfully to others, and 5) appropriately adapt messages to others. The assessment instrument utilized to measure this objective encompassed items reflecting the five principles of human communication and course content taught in the classroom. The measure consists of 15 multiple-choice items, each with four response choices. The questions were designed to assess knowledge of the cognitive learning objectives. Scores for each item were dichotomous (correct or incorrect) and KR-20 reliability analysis for the pretest revealed a .58 and a .64 for the post-
test which are both considered satisfactory for short (10-15) item tests (Kehoe, 1995). Refer to the Appendix for the Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment.

**Behavioral learning outcome assessment.** The second assessment instrument was the Conflict Management Assessment (Mottet, 2003). A second objective of the course focuses on students’ conflict management skills and the instrument selected to evaluate this was a self-perceived conflict management competence measure. This instrument was implemented in the assessment process to measure the behavioral dimension of learning for the basic course. The assessment instrument consists of seven communication behaviors that can be used to manage conflict in relationships. The scale ranges from 0 to 100, with 0 representing perceptions of complete incompetence and 100 representing extreme competence in managing interpersonal conflict. Respondents were asked to indicate their perceived competence in using each of the behavioral skills to manage conflict in relationships. Although previous reliability estimates for this scale have not been previously reported, the alpha reliabilities in the current study were analyzed for the Conflict Management Skills Assessment in both the pretest and posttest. The pretest alpha reliability was .72, while the posttest alpha reliability was reported at .79.

**Affective learning outcome assessment.** The third and final instrument utilized to assess the basic course was the Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). This instrument was selected based on the focus of intercultural competence in the course objectives. Additionally, communication apprehension, and in this in-
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stance, intercultural communication apprehension, has been identified as an assessment of affect toward communication by previous researchers and educators (Commandena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). Thus, this instrument was selected because it effectively measures and demonstrates students’ affect toward the course, as they willingly utilize the course material to alter their communication outside of the classroom with individuals of varying cultures.

The PRICA measures an individual’s perceived apprehension when communicating with people from different cultural groups. The measure consists of 14 Likert items. Responses are indicated on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 representing strongly disagree and 5 representing strongly agree. Scores for the PRICA can range from 14-70. Negative items on the instrument were reverse-coded, such that a total score below 32 indicated the respondent had a high level of intercultural communication apprehension and a total score above 52 indicated a low level of intercultural communication apprehension. Scores between 32 and 52 indicate the respondent has a moderate level of intercultural communication apprehension. The PRICA has demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = .94$) and face and construct validity in previous research (Neulip & McCroskey, 1997). In the current assessment the alpha reliability for the pretest PRICA was .92, while the alpha reliability for the post-test PRICA was .93.

The three instruments were strategically selected for their ability to meet NCA’s established criteria for assessment practices (National Communication Association, n.d.). They were designed to measure the objectives defined by the General Education Council, the commu-
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nication department, and the basic course director as well as indicators of student learning. As previously stated, the goal of the assessment process in education is to demonstrate that cognitive, behavioral, and affective dimensions of student learning are taking place, thus providing justification for the basic communication course as a component of the general education curriculum.

**RESULTS**

Paired samples $t$-tests were conducted to determine if participants’ scores on the three assessment measures differed from the beginning to the end of the semester. This analysis was conducted after a Pearson correlation determined that the three learning indicator scores were unrelated. The range of scores for the Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment pretest was 0-15 ($M = 8.36$, $SD = 2.68$) with the same score range on the posttest assessment ($M = 10.34$, $SD = 2.74$). The $t$-test result was significant: $t(685) = 20.27, p < .001$, indicating the mean cognitive score for students was significantly higher at the end of the semester. This suggests cognitive learning objectives are being met and student cognitive learning is occurring.

The range of scores achieved on the Conflict Management Skills pretest was 3-100 ($M = 66.63$, $SD = 14.37$) and 4-100 ($M = 74.12$, $SD = 13.86$) on the posttest assessment. The $t$-test result was significant: $t(685) = 14.59, p < .001$, indicating the mean of the students’ perceived conflict management skills was significantly higher at the end of the semester than at the beginning.
This result indicates instruction provided during the semester likely contributed to the improvement of students’ behavioral learning of conflict management skills.

The range of scores on the PRICA pre-assessment was 16-70 (M = 52.73, SD = 9.76) with the same score range on the posttest assessment (M = 55.05, SD = 9.58). The t-test result was significant: t(685) = 7.72, p < .001, indicating students’ perceived greater comfort levels in intercultural communication encounters at the end of the semester. Therefore, participants were less apprehensive about communicating in the intercultural context at the end of the semester suggesting that instruction provided a positive change in students’ affect toward course material.

In addition, it is also important to note that the greatest improvement for students was made in the cognitive learning assessment, followed by conflict management and intercultural competence. The calculated t exceeded the critical values in all cases but in descending values in the three areas (cognitive: t = 20.27; conflict management: t = 14.59, and intercultural competence t = 7.71)

**DISCUSSION**

The current research serves as a case study for assessing the core components and objectives of a basic communication course. This study examined cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning outcomes in order to statistically provide a more holistic impression of student learning. Additionally, the current study provided evidence that intercultural communication can be ad-
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dressed and apprehension reduced through teaching within the basic communication course. Upon completion of the course, pretest and posttest results revealed an increase in students’ cognitive learning, improvement in behavioral learning and skills, and a positive change in affective learning measured via attitudes toward intercultural communication. Although these results are only generalizable to the students attending the present institution, the data provides implications for basic communication courses at other institutions and are discussed in the implications section.

Results revealed that students’ scores on the posttest for the Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment were significantly higher than the scores on the pretest. Therefore, after receiving instruction in the basic course, students had a better understanding of the concepts associated with the principles of human communication taught in the class. These results demonstrate the importance of designing clear learning objectives and providing adequate instruction to meet the criteria of these objectives. Additionally, the statistical tests provide confirmation that the cognitive learning objectives are being met and that students are, in fact, developing knowledge of course content through instruction in the basic communication course. These results can be used to provide evidence to university officials that the primary components of communication outlined in the course goals are being learned.

Results also indicated great improvement in student perceptions of their conflict management skills determined by the increase in the behavioral learning scores on the pre- and post-assessments. Students reported a significant increase in their perceived conflict manage-
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ment competency after completing the basic course. Based on the results of the pretest-posttest, it can be concluded that the instruction provided in the course enhanced students’ perceived ability to utilize effective behaviors to manage conflict. This competence is vital to dealing with conflict in contexts taught in this course (interpersonal, small groups, and organizations).

Results of the PRICA provided evidence of students’ feelings or affect toward their intercultural communication. Students reported being less apprehensive when communicating with individuals of different races and/or cultures after completing the course. Specifically, compared to the scores on the pretest, students reported an increase in intercultural communication comfort levels (or reduced intercultural communication apprehension) on the posttest. The outcome of the statistical analysis suggests that students not only developed an awareness of their intercultural fears, but were less apprehensive when considering a communication encounter with individuals of different cultures after taking the basic course.

Intercultural communication apprehension is an obstacle individuals constantly face when interacting with others from different cultures and backgrounds (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). With the dynamic and growing diversity in our population, it is imperative to not only teach students how to communicate with people who are culturally different but also to demonstrate that the students are motivated to do so (Evangelauf, 1990). Researchers have argued that learning intercultural communication skills is essential to survival in both the professional and personal realms (Funkhouser, 1995), and with the increase of administrators in higher education
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focusing on diversity (Hurtado et al., 1999), the findings from the current study are essential for the justification of the basic communication course as a general education requirement. In addition to the inclusion of an intercultural dimension, educators should also focus on effective assessment as a means to improve the basic communication course.

Findings that students performed better on the cognitive learning assessment at the end of the semester was not necessarily surprising but certainly good news for the department and the course. This is typically the priority of most departments—that students learn the course and text material. However, others goals of this course are behaviorally and affectively-oriented and though students may not have improved as much in these two areas, they did change. Students did perceive they could more skillfully manage conflict in their relationships and felt less apprehension during interactions with individuals from other cultures. The information gleaned from these rather simple results can aid instructors in developing activities and teaching methods to assist students in honing their skills in these two areas. The change is positive, but more can be done to advance these areas of learning in the basic communication course.

Assessment instruments are powerful tools that can enhance instruction as well as student learning outcomes. In addition, they provide vital evidence to administrators that the basic communication course fulfills the expectations of general education courses. As results of the current assessment confirm, instructors were able to meet the course objectives and stimulate learning among students. As previous research has
demonstrated, without providing evidence of successful student learning, the basic communication course may lose its position as a general education requirement (Morreale et al., 2006). Current results indicated that instruction of communication principles through the basic course enabled students to perform significantly better on an assessment of their communication knowledge, skills, and affect. The findings provide evidence that the basic communication course is achieving its goal of supplying students with these three vital aspects of learning within the communication discipline. It may also provide direction for basic course directors whose courses are facing the possibility of elimination or those hoping to be recognized for the value and essential learning tools provided in their course.

Limitations/Implications for Future Research

Limitations. The current study offers valuable information concerning assessment practices and inclusion of an intercultural dimension in the basic communication course. However, the results should be interpreted within the limitations of the study. The sample size served as a limitation, as only 25 percent of students enrolled in the basic communication course participated in the assessment process. Even though the sample of students likely represents the population of students enrolled in the basic course, they did not all participate nor was the sample random. In addition, many students drop the course throughout the semester and many completed the pretest, but not the posttest, which prevented the authors from using their data. Along with this, demographic information was not gath-
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Another limitation concerns inconsistency in the distribution of the pre- and post-assessment instruments. The majority of the basic course instructors asked students to complete the pre-assessment instrument during the first lab session and the post-assessment during the final lab session. However, some basic course instructors advised students to complete the pre- and post-assessments outside of the classroom. The inconsistency in the administration of the assessments serves as a limitation because those who completed the assessments outside of the classroom were not given ample opportunity to ask questions about any confusion related to assessment items. It is important to view the study within these limitations in an effort to ensure valid and reliable assessment practices in the future.

**Implications for future assessment practices.** Given the research concerning assessment practices in the basic communication course, there are several implications for future research. First, based on the limitations of the study there are several recommendations for future assessment practices utilizing a pretest-posttest methodology. In an effort to enhance reliability and validity, future assessment practices should incorporate the use of technology to aid in reaching a larger sample. The current study utilized surveys that were bound in the course guidebook, which is a required text for all students. Therefore, the response rate was not representative of the total sample of students enrolled in the basic course. Rather than examining a portion of the sample, future assessment practices should consider providing
students with a variety of options including paper and electronic surveys to increase participation.

Future assessment practices should also consider utilizing a control group to compare the results of students who received instruction in the basic course with those who did not. Students in the control group should be given the pretest and posttest assessments in the same manner as students enrolled in the basic course. This assessment design could provide greater confidence in the results and indicate instruction as the primary change agent (Beebe et al., 2004). These assessment procedures would enable educators to demonstrate to university administrators that the basic course is achieving its intended goals (Backlund & Arneson, 2000) and should remain in the general education curriculum.

Implications for teaching the basic course. The results of the current case study provide valuable information and have large implications for the basic communication course at this and other institutions of higher education. Although the results of the study were statistically significant, the increases were not as considerable as preferred. In order to create a more noteworthy increase in scores on the assessment measures, the authors must evaluate all aspects of the course and the assessment process itself. Thus, the following changes will be discussed as means of improving the instruction and student learning in the basic communication course.

The first major change which will be implemented in the basic course deals with the behavioral domain of learning. Although the scores increased from the beginning to the end of the semester, the authors suggest fo-
cusing more time in the lab sessions practicing skill building in order to experience a more significant increase in scores. In the current case study, lab instructors have been allowed to select lesson plans regarding the conflict management skill sets, and many instructors utilize media examples and have students analyze the skill sets of the characters. However, the results of the study suggest that lab instructors should focus their plans to more effectively train students to deal with conflict through experiential practice and role-play scenarios. This would allow students to actually engage in conflict behaviors, while having a trained evaluator present to provide feedback.

Another change which will be implemented based on the results of the current case study deals with the measures used to assess student learning. Although the measures appear valid, the items should be examined to ensure they are the most effective to use when measuring the course’s objectives. Specifically, the conflict management competence and the cognitive learning outcome scales are being examined for their usefulness. The assessment team suggests revising the cognitive learning outcome scale by adding additional questions in order to provide evidence of further reliability. For the conflict management competence scale, the authors have a few suggestions. First, it would be beneficial to assess students’ actual conflict behaviors rather than ask students to complete a self-report measurement regarding their behavioral perceptions. This would require the development of a rating system and evaluators trained in effective conflict behaviors which they would utilize to assess students’ conflict competence. If the department does not have the funds for implementing this
assessment plan, another option would be to revise Cupach and Spitzberg’s (1981) Self-Rated Competence Scale to fit the conflict management competence dimension. Utilizing a scale which has previously demonstrated reliability and validity is crucial to the assessment process and should be done in the future of this basic communication course.

Finally, it will be important and informative to collect demographic information from students in future assessment instruments. This will allow instructors to know more about the diversity of students who may be facing challenges with the course material. Additionally, as the nation’s population continues to become more diverse, higher education curricula must accommodate the changing nature of society. Thus, it is the objective of the authors to urge others to incorporate intercultural communication into the curriculum of the basic course. Instructing students in this area not only provides them with critical knowledge and skills for interacting with others who are culturally different, but it also provides additional justification for the basic communication course to maintain its general education status.

**CONCLUSION**

The assessment process is critical in determining students’ cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning; therefore, communication scholars must continuously improve assessment practices. Without providing evidence of student learning, the basic communication course may be at risk for elimination within the general education curriculum. If the basic communication course
were removed, students would not gain essential communication knowledge and skills in the interpersonal, small group, and public speaking arenas. Thus, it is imperative to continue improving our assessment measures as a means to keep the basic communication course a component in this curriculum.

Furthermore, it is only through assessment that educators will know if they need to revise their methods of instruction. Providing students with communication knowledge, affect, and skills should be the ultimate goal for communication educators. Therefore, we must effectively evaluate these domains in order to ensure that our students are receiving a well-rounded education. Additionally, researchers should continue to explore various means of assessment in order to provide basic course instructors with innovative ways to measure learning outcomes. Without analyzing the assessment process in general, we will be unable to “know if we are actually doing what we intend to do in the classroom and in our educational programs” (Backlund & Arneson, 2000, p. 88). The current study should be viewed as a case study for other basic communication courses across the nation. Although the results of the study may seem unique to the institution where the study takes place, the implications move far beyond that limited scope. Other basic communication courses may look to this as an example in assessment.

Specifically, other basic communication courses should be assessing student learning based on the three domains of learning relative to the course’s objectives. Furthermore, it is the intent of the authors to encourage department chairs and basic course directors to be proactive in examining their assessment process and the
results from this process in an attempt to promote growth and retention of the basic communication course. Without this process, instructors will be unsure if the information they are providing is actually being received and internalized. Thus, educators will have no way of knowing whether student learning is being achieved. Finally, the assessment process is quickly becoming the most effective means of justifying the need for a basic communication course as a general education requirement. As a general education requirement, the basic communication course may provide departments with large enrollment, which in turn, provides financial support as well as a means by which graduate teaching assistants receive financial support and teaching experience. To sum up, assessment affects every level of higher education institutions including students and instructors, and courses and departments, providing further evidence that educators need to evaluate the means by which they assess in order to refine the process to its best capabilities.

References


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APPENDIX

Cognitive Learning Outcome Assessment

Instructions: Please place your student identification number in the space marked “Identification Number.” Please circle the multiple-choice response that most accurately answers the question or completes the sentence.

1. Luke is driving his car to the grocery store. The music is playing, his wife is talking to him on his cell phone, and the A/C is buzzing. Luke begins to sing the words to the song on the radio. Which stage of perception has Luke engaged in?
   a. Attention
   b. Interpretation
   c. Selection
   d. Organization

2. In the perception process, the process of converting information into convenient, understandable, and efficient patterns that allow people to make sense of what they observed is defined as:
   a. Attention
   b. Selection
   c. Organization
   d. Interpretation

3. Robin suspected that her roommate, Julie, wanted to break up with her boyfriend. Rather than asking her specifically, Robin paid close attention to how Julie complained about him, avoided his phone calls, and was late getting ready for dates with him. What method was Robin using to check her perception of Julie?
   a. Active perception checking
   b. Direct perception checking
   c. Indirect perception checking
   d. Avoidant perception checking
4. The difference between the denotative and connotative meanings of words is that:
   a. Connotative meanings are direct and objective while denotative meanings contain emotional elements.
   b. Denotative meanings are personal and subjective while connotative meanings are restrictive and literal.
   c. Connotative meanings are less meaningful than denotative meanings.
   d. Denotative meanings convey content while connotative meanings convey feelings.

5. In response to his son’s request, Dad says, “I don’t care what you want. You’ll do what I tell you, when I tell you, and that’s that!” Which strategy for creating a supportive climate does his outburst most likely violate?
   a. Solving problems rather than controlling others
   b. Being genuine rather than being manipulative
   c. Empathizing rather than being apathetic
   d. Describing your own feelings rather than evaluating others

6. Kenny is having trouble with his girlfriend Liz. During one of their conflicts, Kenny said that she was a “high maintenance” girlfriend. Liz became very defensive. After taking COMM 1310, Kenny learned the difference between supportive and defensive verbal messages. He realized that he should have said, “I receive five calls a day from you asking my advice and I’m beginning to feel uneasy about your dependence on me.” This scenario represents which pair of supportive versus defensive verbal messages?
   a. Descriptive vs. Evaluative Verbal Messages
   b. Empathic vs. Apathetic Verbal Messages
   c. Equal vs. Superior Verbal Messages
   d. Flexible vs. Rigid Verbal Messages
7. Angela is becoming aware of how touch stimulates meaning in the minds of others. Her awareness focuses on:
   a. Haptics
   b. Kinesics
   c. Proxemics
   d. Vocalics

8. Jen and Lisa are tubing down the Guadalupe River. Jen sees a group of good-looking men floating their way. As they near, Jen and Lisa suck in their stomachs, tense up their muscles, and try not to look at the guys as they are approaching. Jen and Lisa’s behaviors illustrate:
   a. Affect displays
   b. Back-channeling cues
   c. Courtship readiness
   d. Positional cues

9. You and your friends congregate at the same table in the Alkek library almost every day. You always sit in the same chair each time you and your friends meet. Your behavior illustrates:
   a. Adaptors
   b. Territoriality
   c. Personal space
   d. Public space

10. Hearing is different from listening in that hearing is a __________ process.
    a. Affective
    b. Cognitive
    c. Physiological
    d. Psychological

11. The process of confirming your understanding of a message represents which step of the listening process?
    a. Attending
    b. Understanding
    c. Remembering
    d. Responding
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12. As Juan sat in his biology lab, the lab instructor was droning on about the techniques of vivisection. Juan kept thinking about the concert he was going to attend this weekend on 6th Street in Austin. Which of the following stages of listening is Juan having the most trouble with?
   a. Selecting
   b. Attending
   c. Remembering
   d. Responding

13. Which of the following is a typical value of a masculine culture?
   a. Caring for the less fortunate
   b. Valuing traditional roles for men and women
   c. Building relationships is more important than completing tasks
   d. Being sensitive toward others

14. Which of the following is a characteristic of a centralized approach to power culture?
   a. There are clear lines of authority in who reports to whom
   b. Leadership is spread out among a number of people
   c. Power and influence are shared by many people
   d. Decisions are made by consensus

15. Men place more emphasis on the ________ dimension of communication because they view communication as functioning primarily for information exchange. This dimension contains primarily ________ messages.
   a. Relational, verbal
   b. Content, verbal
   c. Relational, nonverbal
   d. Content, nonverbal
Rethinking Evaluation Strategies for Student Participation

Kevin R. Meyer
Stephen K. Hunt

Many college instructors encourage and value student participation. The amount and quality of student participation desired, however, varies significantly. Instructors that view student participation as an essential element in classroom learning seek methods of encouraging students to actively participate in their education. One popular strategy that has emerged among faculty is the use of graded participation (Balas, 2000; Bean & Peterson, 1998; Fritschner, 2000; Jacobs & Chase, 1992; Tatar, 2005). Although graded participation strategies take many forms and may vary significantly from instructor to instructor, the aim of enhancing student involvement through the incentive of grades is generally the same (Bean & Peterson, 1998). The basic communication course, in particular, being a performance-oriented class, is a prime example of a curricular area in which oral participation is typically required through a mixture of public speeches, class discussion, and group activities. While previous studies have focused on the desirability of student participation and the variety of methods employed by instructors to encourage student participation, these studies have almost always examined the perspective of instructors. Importantly, research has failed to inquire about or consider student perceptions of graded participation strategies.
College students typically face a number of classes in their academic careers that include participation in discussion as a component of their grade (Balas, 2000; Bean & Peterson, 1998; Fritschner, 2000; Jacobs & Chase, 1992; Tatar, 2005). Although the portion of the student’s grade derived from participation and the method of assigning that grade typically varies from course to course, students inevitably encounter several classes in which participation is graded. The emphasis in the basic communication course on oral participation during presentations and during class discussion positions the course well to address issues concerning graded participation strategies. Unfortunately, students are rarely trained how to participate or given explicit criteria to follow. According to Wood (1996), the best case scenario for basic course students is that “they have an instructor’s brief definition of class participation which appears on the course syllabus. At worst, students not only have no idea what the instructor means by class participation, they also receive no instruction in how to participate” (p. 108). Thus, the prospect of having to participate for a portion of their grade can foster a confusing and frustrating experience for students. Although the basic communication course, as compared to courses in other subject areas, typically provides criteria with regard to evaluating oral presentations (Stitt, Simonds, & Hunt, 2003), clear criteria for evaluating classroom discussion is more rare. One notable exception is the use of “participation sheets” that involve basic course students in assessing their own participation in classroom discussions (Rattenborg, Simonds, & Hunt, 2004; Simonds & Carson, 2000). Rattenborg et al. (2004) argued that participation sheets
may increase student motivation and learning. But, do participation sheets improve the quality of students’ participation? And, how do basic course students feel about participation sheets being a required part of their grades?

How students respond to graded participation strategies has received scant attention by prior researchers. This oversight is problematic given the number of college courses, including the basic course, that require and assess student participation. In order to address this gap, the present study examines students’ perceptions of graded participation and the instructor behaviors in the basic course that students say influence their motivation to participate actively. The present study takes an additional step by examining students’ specific suggestions for instructors to improve classroom participation.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

An examination of extant literature concerning student participation quickly reveals that scholars have yet to reach a consensus on the value of grading student participation. As a result, it can be difficult for basic course instructors to navigate and make sense of this scholarship as they attempt to refine their own classroom practices. Our review of the literature reveals several, sometimes competing, advantages and disadvantages of graded participation. Initially, graded participation is said to be an advantageous pedagogical strategy to the extent that it improves student leadership and self-esteem, motivation and learning, fulfills students’
ethical obligations to classmates, provides students with a framework for effective interaction, facilitates a positive classroom climate, and results in positive evaluations of instructors.

**Advantages of Graded Participation**

First, graded participation helps to enhance student leadership skills and self-esteem. Shindler (2003) argued that assessing participation can help make problem students good students, and help good students become leaders. Similarly, assessing participation may be useful in teaching students to stay on task and to work cooperatively. Several scholars have advanced the claim that implementing self-assessed, graded participation strategies promotes student-owned behaviors, increases students’ internal locus of control, and promotes self-esteem (Benham, 1993; Rennie, 1991).

Second, other scholars have found that graded participation strategies increase students’ motivation (Covington, 1996; Maehr & Meyer, 1997). In addition, Sadker and Sadker (1994) found students consider participation to be related to effective learning and to result in more positive views of the learning experience. Moreover, Bean and Peterson (1998) argued that graded participation causes students to adjust their study habits in anticipation of class discussions. Furthermore, Davis (1993) contended that active participation contributes to student learning.

Third, scholars have also discussed the ethical implications of active classroom participation. Petress (2001) argued that students who refuse to actively participate in their learning are actually acting unethically.
His argument is that student reticence, withdrawal, or fear of interacting prevents that student from sharing what he or she knows, and it deprives the teacher and classmates from benefiting by what a given student has to offer. Such students negatively influence classroom learning by decreasing teacher effectiveness and prevent classmates from learning from these insights, observations, and experiences (Petress, 2001). Worse still, reticent students are less likely to apply, extend, or transfer learning to other contexts, than students who actively participate (Petress, 2001).

Fourth, graded participation may provide students with a framework for effective interaction. Education scholars like Shindler (2003) have argued that grading participation allows instructors to place significant value on the quality of human interaction in our classes. When used effectively, Shindler (2003) argued, graded participation can teach students a framework for effective interaction. Similarly, Bean and Peterson (1998) contended that graded participation can send positive signals about the kind of learning and thinking that is expected.

Fifth, scholars have also examined the effects of participation strategies on the overall classroom climate. For example, Fassinger (2000) found that students in high-participation classes, as contrasted with students in low-participation classes, perceived their groups’ dynamics more positively. Such students were also more likely to describe their peers in the class as cooperative, get to know each other, experience greater levels of comfort, and have higher perceptions of support and respect. Additionally, she explained that in the high-participation classes, students reported less peer pres-
sure to keep comments brief or avoid controversial opinions.

Finally, Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, and Piccininn (2003) found that students who actively participate in class perceive their instructors differently than students who participate less. When students perceive themselves as active participants in the classroom, they perceive their instructors to be more positive and personal, capable of stimulating more discussion, and they have a more positive impression of their professors overall than did students who perceived themselves as less active (Crombie et al., 2003). Thus, the level of the students’ participation in class may impact a students’ end-of-term evaluation of the instructor. Fassinger (2000) found that instructors with higher participation classes are perceived as more supportive and approachable.

In sum, the basic communication course would seem to benefit from the advantages of student participation in that the course naturally places a great deal of emphasis on oral student participation through speeches and presentations, group work and activities, and class discussions. Indeed, most basic course directors and instructors would likely echo the advantages of participation given their pedagogy and curriculum.

Disadvantages of Graded Participation

Despite the potential advantages of student participation, however, scholars have also discovered a number of disadvantages associated with graded participation including problems posed for reticent students, favoritism and bias, assessment and measurement issues, and
perceptions of instructors. First, reticent students often
remain silent, regardless of whether participation is
graded or not. Fritschner (2000) found that in 344 ob-
served class sessions, many of which included graded
participation, an average of 28% of those in attendance
verbally participated and 18% of those in attendance
accounted for 79% of all the students’ comments in
class. Thus, even in classrooms employing graded par-
ticipation strategies, the vast majority of students re-
main silent. In part, these data may be explained by dif-
ferences in how talkers and quiet students define par-
ticipation (Fritschner, 2000).

Second, a review of literature reveals a dark side to
graded participation strategies. As Shindler (2003) has
noted, when used appropriately graded participation
can benefit students in a number of ways; however,
when used inappropriately graded participation may be
viewed by students as an instrument of favoritism and
bias. If teachers use this pedagogical tool arbitrarily, it
may be viewed by students as a part of their grade
over which they have no control—as a mechanism for
the instructor to reward students he/she likes and pun-
ish those he/she does not like (Shindler, 2003). Thus,
graded participation may reflect instructor subjectivity.
Jacobs and Chase (1992) explained that the main pur-
pose of grades is to assess the extent to which students
have learned; not to assess student behavior. They con-
tended that since the development of participation skills
is rarely taught by instructors, graded participation
strategies constitute subjective judgment of student be-
havior on the part of instructors. Furthermore, they
noted that, “the extent of class participation often de-
pends on the student’s personality,” and it is, therefore,
unfair to grade students on the basis of their personality traits (p. 196). They elaborated by stating that students who are introverted, shy, or culturally diverse are disadvantaged by such grading methods. Additionally, Bean and Peterson (1998) observed that professors often determine participation grades impressionistically as a “fudge factor” in the final grade.

Third, participation is difficult to objectively assess (Jacobs & Chase, 1992; Victoria University of Wellington, 2000). Plus, instructors may find it difficult to simultaneously manage group discussion and assess participation (Jacobs & Chase, 1992). If instructors use graded participation, they should specify clear criteria for assessing student participation (Wood, 1996). For basic communication course programs that standardize graded participation strategies, training all instructors to consistently apply the criteria across sections is necessary (Victoria University of Wellington, 2000). Moreover, graded participation strategies have been criticized for being incapable of measuring what they are intended to measure. Wood (1996) noted that participation is a poor measure of students’ abilities or engagement with course material. Even under optimal circumstances, in which instructors provide students with specific grading criteria for participation, it is difficult to measure the cognitive involvement of students. Wood elaborated that students’ vocal contributions are an ineffective measure of their knowledge. She further argued that basic course instructors “must get away from the false assumption that the amount one learns is directly connected to the amount one does (or does not) talk” (p. 111). Thus, graded participation strategies can be safely said to measure the frequency of student communication, but...
not the quality of that participation, nor the extent of the student’s cognitive learning. Furthermore, since it is likely that graded participation fails to actually measure quality participation, it is doubtful that such strategies truly increase the type of participation for which instructors implement these grading strategies. As Wood argued, “what is abundantly clear is that a class participation requirement neither promotes participation nor does it effectively measure what a student learns in class” (p. 112).

Finally, Fritschner (2000) found that students perceive instructors to have a large influence on student participation. Her study discovered that students perceived the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of instructors to be significant factors that either encouraged or discouraged student participation in class. Although instructors were typically unaware of the effect that their facial expressions, voice, and messages perceived as “talking down” to students had on the classroom environment, the ultimate impact of these behaviors was found to be a general dampening of discussion (Fritschner, 2000). In some instances, she found that a vicious cycle of frustration was created by professors who wanted the class to participate, but made students feel “put down” with negative feedback. On the other hand, she found that instructors who used self-disclosure or were characterized by students as respected, trustworthy, and accessible tended to have a positive impact on facilitating class discussion.

In sum, although basic course instructors may value and encourage student participation, they should be aware of the potential disadvantages of grading participation. Of course, speeches and presentations must be
graded in the basic communication course. However, questions remain regarding the use of participation grades for class discussions.

**Research Questions**

Many existing studies fail to consider student perspectives with regard to graded participation. Additionally, few studies examine specific graded participation strategies. And, only a couple of studies have examined the use of participation grades in the basic course classroom (Rattenborg, Simonds, & Hunt, 2004; Simonds & Carson, 2000). Thus, three research questions emerged from our literature review to guide the present study.

RQ1: How do basic course students perceive graded participation strategies?

RQ2: What instructor behaviors act to influence student participation?

RQ3: What strategies do basic course students recommend for encouraging participation?

**Method**

**Participants**

Students were recruited from random sections of the basic communication course at a large Midwestern university to take part in two focus group interviews. A total of twelve students participated in the focus groups. Participants were predominately female \((n = 9)\) compared to male \((n = 3)\), Caucasian \((n = 10)\) compared to African American \((n = 2)\), and in their first year of col-
lege \( (n = 10) \) compared to second year \( (n = 1) \) or third year \( (n = 1) \). The average age of focus group participants was 18.75 years of age. Given that the basic course is taken during students first year at our institution and that the campus population is predominately homogenous, these demographics tend to be representative of our student body.

**Procedures**

Focus group participants were queried regarding their perceptions of graded participation strategies. Focus group interviews are an appropriate form of data collection for this type of exploratory research because individuals’ experiences tend to induce other group members to express their own perspectives, and this method recognizes the regularly changing nature of perceptions (Lindlof, 1995). Accordingly, group participants are able to elaborate on issues and collaboratively offer insights through the course of interaction rather than just rely on previously formed perceptions or bounded impressions (Myers, 1998). The focus groups probed student perceptions of graded participation generally and on use of participation sheets by their basic course instructors. Simonds and Carson (2000) explained that participation sheets are an instrument used daily to rate students’ involvement in the classroom and foster student engagement. This method requires students to self-assess their own preparation for and participation in class based on a set of pre-established criteria. Given that the focus groups were conducted during the eighth week of the semester, all of the students had significant experience with using participation sheets.
Interview Protocol

After operationalizing the concept of graded participation, the researchers developed an interview guide complete with open-ended questions and various probing questions to prompt discussion among the participants. The focus groups were facilitated by skilled moderators in a quiet room and lasted approximately one hour. The sessions ended when the conversations naturally came to an end. Each focus group was audio taped for transcription purposes.

Data Analysis

Following the design and data collection, the project went through several phases of coding. Researchers collaborated on coding and analysis by proceeding to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of the complete data set from both focus groups, breaking data down into discrete parts. The team approach involving more than one researcher during analysis tends to facilitate a higher degree of reliability in interpretation than relying just on independent steps (Knodel, 1993). Primary analysis involved reviewing the transcripts to identify themes in student responses by organizing the transcripts into “analytically useful subdivisions” or “code maps” (Knodel, 1993, p. 45). Next, both researchers discussed potential interpretations. From this, a basic listing of categories was generated. Coding and recoding stopped at the point of saturation or redundancy.
RESULTS

Research Question One

The first research question posed in this study concerns basic course students perceptions of graded participation. With regard to RQ1, three themes emerged from the responses of both focus groups, indicating disadvantages of graded participation. First, graded participation strategies were seen as a disadvantage to shy or reticent students. For instance, one female student observed that, “it hurts the people that are more shy, though, and I think sometimes that is not fair because they might really understand what they are doing, but they do not want to raise their hand and say it.” Another female student agreed, “I do not mind talking in class, but I know that a lot of my friends are shy and do not like to talk.” Independently, the focus group members strongly supported the idea that students could cognitively participate in discussions while remaining verbally silent. In other words, students can be both silent and cognitively engaged with the ongoing class discussion. A third female participant explained, “just because somebody does not participate does not mean that they are not listening.” Interestingly, a different female student remarked:

I usually do not even say anything, because I do not actually agree with oral participation grades. Some people are just shy in class and do not want to raise their hand or do not want to be called on in front of a group of people. When I know it is graded, I will not even speak. It does not even matter to me, because usually participation points are really not that many
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points anyway. I just do not agree with it, so I do not even raise my hand.

When asked if she could still track the discussion and learning, she continued, “I am still learning, I am still into discussion. I will rarely ever zone out in class.”

Second, the focus group members offered several comments questioning the quality of participation and student learning. For example, a male student commented that participation sheets are “sometimes like busy work.” A female participant expanded on this idea by explaining that, “it is just measuring how many people can raise their hand and say something, or add something; the teacher never said it had to be meaningful.” As another female student noted:

I think somebody could be completely zoning out, listen for two minutes, and then raise their hand and say this or that, while the person that is really paying attention is not raising their hand. I do not think that just because you raise your hand or talk in class that that really says you are getting more out of it than somebody that does not.

Moreover, some focus group members noted that the participation of other students can even threaten the learning of the rest of the class. A third female participant explained, “sometimes you will think, oh, I did not say anything today, I had better add something because I do not want my grade to go down.” For example, if a student asks a question or responds to a question in an effort to get his or her participation points for the day, but is incorrect, then other classmates internalize the inaccurate information. When asked if this would put her at a disadvantage, another student noted that:
Sometimes what they say is not even right anyway, but at least they talk, so I would almost rather have the teacher or professor say what it is, instead of a student that does not really know what they are talking about say what it is.

Third, although students indicated that participation sheets in the basic course are the best strategy they have encountered for assessing participation, they questioned the overall effectiveness of participation sheets. Many remarked that they had classmates who would still refuse to communicate. For instance, one female participant argued that:

Even with the participation sheets, there are still people who seriously have not said or contributed a single time, other than when the instructor went person to person. You generally know who is going to participate in class and who is not, regardless of whether there is a participation sheet or not.

While students agreed that participation was important to an extent in basic course discussions, they stopped short of indicating that it should be a large part of their overall grade. Another female student posited, “I think it is important, but it should not be something you are graded on.” Ironically, a third female participant noted that some students will participate whether participation is graded or not:

It is not like you should have to be pressured into participating; if you are going to do it then you are going to volunteer. I did not have a class where at least one person did not volunteer to talk to the class about situations or things that are related. I do not think it should have to be a pressured thing, because I think people are more reluctant that way. People do not like
being forced to do things, and I know a lot of my friends who would probably object to it, because why should you have to participate. If it is voluntary participation and something I want to do, then I do it, but I not going to be pressured like that.

Graded participation was even seen as a power issue, whereby basic course instructors used the participation grade as power over students. A different female student speculated that, “it is definitely a control issue.”

**Research Question Two**

The second research question addressed instructor behaviors that influence student participation. With regard to RQ2, six significant themes emerged from the focus group discussions. First, the focus groups indicated that instructor immediacy overwhelms all other instructor behaviors. As opposed to “intimidating” instructors, the focus group participants repeatedly characterized immediate instructors as being more likely to facilitate student participation and classroom discussion. A female student commented that:

> If the person is easy to talk to and makes you feel comfortable, you are more prone to answer a question versus someone who is monotone. Even though the question is open ended, you feel kind of intimidated so I think the instructor is a big part of it.

Instructor immediacy overwhelmed the type of questioning employed, as another female explained, “the instructor is more important.” More significantly, students indicated a greater willingness to participate for an immediate instructor than a nonimmediate instruc-
tor, regardless of whether the instructors used graded participation or not. Second, the type of feedback to student responses by instructors plays a key role in the motivation of students to participate. Instructors who offer positive feedback are more likely to foster participation than those instructors who offer negative feedback or “put-downs.” A female student noted that, “the personality of the teacher is really important; I hate some subjects because of one or two teachers I have had in the past.” Third, an instructor’s nonverbal cues were noted as a key factor in students’ willingness to participate. Fourth, the atmosphere of the classroom is critical. Focus group participants indicated that instructors hoping to encourage student participation should create a friendly environment in the classroom. Students indicated that the climate must be one in which students are not afraid to take risks with their responses. Fifth, the type of questions employed by instructors has a direct effect on the likelihood of students to respond. The focus group participants also favored open-ended questions that required a variety of potential correct responses, as well as questions soliciting student opinions. The focus groups clearly did not favor questions that sought definitions, a single correct response, or simple recall information from assigned readings. For instance, discussions debating the definition of communication were perceived as more valuable than questions asking students to recall the four methods of delivery. Sixth, the focus groups indicated that graduate teaching assistants in the basic course demonstrated a greater care for students and their success, while many tenure track faculty in their other classes seemed to care more for the content and material.
**Research Question Three**

The third research question concerned strategies that basic course students recommend for encouraging participation. With regard to RQ3, three general themes emerged from the focus group discussions. Specifically, the responses of focus group members fell into general categories of environmental structure, classroom climate, and grading format. First, in terms of environmental structure, the focus group members identified small discussion groups, circular seating arrangements, and small class sizes in the basic course—as opposed to large lecture hall formats in many of their other classes—as being particularly effective at stimulating participation. Second, in terms of the classroom climate, the focus group members indicated a preference for a less formal environment created by ice-breaker discussions and random methods of cold calling used by their basic course instructors. Although students reacted negatively to the idea of cold calling, they did indicate that such behavior was permissible from instructors if the instructor used a random method, such as drawing cards marked with student names at random from a deck. Third, in terms of grading format, many focus group members recommended alternative participation assignments for shy students, giving points for attendance, allowing students to evaluate their own participation (which the participation sheets our basic course instructors use permit, to a degree), and clearly defined criteria for assessing participation (like the one used on the participation sheets). For example, a female observed that:
They control your grade—you are not the only person. I could write down a five everyday and the teacher could say “nope, you got a two” everyday just because she does not like you...she could change the number and you do not really know why.

Thus, some focus group members found the use of participation sheets to be a less than ideal strategy for measuring the engagement of silent classmates. Of note, though, many of the focus group members agreed that the participation sheets their basic course instructors used were a more effective means of grading student participation than the graded participation strategies used by instructors in their other courses.

**DISCUSSION**

Generally, student participation in the basic course classroom is valued by both instructors and students. What constitutes participation, however, is often a matter of confusion and disagreement for instructors and students alike. Faculty and student definitions of and preferences for participation are not always aligned (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004; Fritschner, 2000). However, previous studies have exclusively represented the viewpoint of instructors. Thus, the present study examined basic course students’ perceptions of graded participation strategies. The comments by focus group members provide several reasons to rethink evaluation strategies for student participation both in the basic course as well as in other curricular areas. For example, for highly apprehensive students, the pressure to participate, whether real or perceived, may interfere...
with learning. If students are worried about what to say or nervous about trying to participate a certain number of times each class period, it is likely that they may focus more on the comment or question they intend to contribute than they do the discussion at hand. As a result, these students may not listen carefully to or may not carefully track the material and content being discussed. In the end, the responses of focus group members in this study raise questions for pedagogy and training programs that basic course directors and instructors should carefully consider.

**Pedagogical Implications**

*Pseudo critical thinking.* Graded participation strategies may foster pseudo critical thinking by failing to check low-quality participation or erroneous responses. Paul (1995) argued that education runs the risk, if not designed carefully, of doing more harm than good by fostering pseudo critical thinking. He explained that “when questions that require better or worse answers are treated as matters of opinion, pseudo critical thinking occurs. Students come to uncritically assume that everyone’s ‘opinion’ is of equal value” (p. 56). Under such conditions, graded participation may actually stifle rather than stimulate learning. Several focus group members agreed that graded participation changes the frequency, but not the quality of participation. Increased participation, however, may simply constitute a compliance response on the part of students (Balas, 2000). In order to receive their participation points for the day, students will raise their hands more frequently. Thus, Paul claimed that “the failure to teach students to
recognize, value, and respect good reasoning is one of the most significant failings of education today” (p. 56).

Unfortunately, it appears that there are circumstances in which graded participation strategies might contribute to such shortcomings. One must wonder whether the students actually experience meaningful behavioral learning or simply engage in a compliance response. In other words, are students engaging in these behaviors simply because they know they have to in order to earn a good grade? The results of the present study provide little support for the claim that basic course students actually transfer these behaviors into other contexts.

**Silence and power.** Psychological reactance theory posits that when one’s autonomy is threatened, one will act out against it (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). The focus group data indicate that some students may chose not to participate simply because the instructor is grading participation. In fact, some focus group students provided excellent examples of psychological reactance theory at work, noting that they may refuse to participate just to spite the instructor’s use of graded participation. In other words, students react against the instructor’s imposed limitation on silence by remaining silent. As a result, silence may provide students a means of expressing power over a situation in the classroom that otherwise is beyond their control. But, silence does not mean that students are not knowledgeable (Balas, 2000). Therefore, it seems reasonable for basic course instructors to avoid grading strategies that may cause students to use silence as a means of reactance.

Rather than avoiding participation altogether, basic course instructors could design alternative assignments that allow students to demonstrate their understanding
of assigned readings (e.g., written participation logs) without directly limiting their autonomy in the classroom.

The focus group data make it clear that graded participation strategies have implications for basic course students’ perceptions of instructor power. Students may perceive that graded participation strategies provide the instructor with a tool to coax students into participating. To be sure, graded participation represents a power that the instructor holds over the students. To this end, graded participation may work to disempower students. In short, graded participation becomes a tool the instructor welds against the students. Freire (1985) cautioned that education is a vehicle, manipulated by political motives, that oppresses those students who hold particular worldviews. From this pedagogical perspective, a critical teacher should seek student participation and empowerment through discussion rather than “teacher-talk” (Shor, 1993). However, there is no clear support for doing more than encouraging student participation. Freire’s critical pedagogy does not license the grading of participation. Open critical thought of students is necessary (hooks, 1993), but cannot be fostered through oppressive means.

**Implications for Basic Course Training Programs**

*Criteria for grading participation.* A variety of suggestions emerged from the present study that should be carefully considered by basic course directors and instructors. It is, at least initially, the instructor’s responsibility to engage basic course students in participation. An instructor’s communicative style and chosen method...
Methods of instruction should be tailored such that basic course students are inspired to participate in discussions and learning. Additionally, instructors should provide clear criteria for grading participation. In order to reap the full benefits of graded participation, instructors must make clear to students what is expected of them. According to Shindler (2003), the more visible the criteria are to the students, the more graded participation works to reinforce the concept of quality participation. Similarly, Craven and Hogan (2001) argued that clearly communicating expectations for participation is critical for effective classroom management. Moreover, the implementation of scoring rubrics for student participation can alleviate the problem of impressionistic grading (Bean & Peterson, 1998). Ironically, though, the participation sheets used by focus group members’ basic communication course instructors would seem to meet these standards. Yet, the focus group participants found participation sheets to be ineffective in some regards and counterproductive in others. The root of the problem may well be that students felt compelled to contribute something orally every day in class. That compulsion led some students to offer relatively unimportant and uninspired comments in class. It led other students to withdraw from oral participation entirely. These findings suggest that basic course instructors should carefully consider alternative means of measuring student participation. For example, instructors might consider assigning participation credit if students attend public speeches and other events outside of class that are relevant to course material. Asking students to carefully reflect on those experiences in a participation log could help students forge important linkages between the
outside world and course concepts, while simultaneously developing their critical thinking skills.

**Instructor training.** Basic course instructors should provide training and instruction in participation to students if graded participation strategies are used. Jacobs and Chase (1992) concurred that training for students must accompany graded participation strategies. Basic course instructors already train students how to speak in public, so training students how to participate in class discussion seems to be a logical extension of the course. As Wood (1996) noted, “if instructors require students to participate in class, then instructors are required to teach students how to participate” (p. 122). Importantly, though, training students to participate involves much more than simply saying participation is required as part of a student’s grade. Even Petress (2001) specified that students should be taught to use communication skills that provide positive and constructive feedback to other classmates during discussions, while being discouraged from using negative feedback. Again, instructors may want to consider offering students a wide range of behaviors (e.g., offering oral comments in class, actively participating in classroom activities, participating in relevant out of classroom activities, providing written rather than spoken comments, etc.) as options for participating.

**Monitoring discussion.** Importantly, several focus group members agreed that graded participation gives over-talkers license to dominate conversations. Bean and Peterson (1998) supported this sentiment when they posited that graded participation strategies inherently give rise to the problem of how to deal with over-talkers dominating class discussions at the expense of
more quiet classmates. Recall that Fritschner’s (2000) research demonstrates that 18% of students account for nearly 79% of all comments offered in class. Students in the focus groups further indicated a strong dislike of this kind of behavior on the part of basic course classmates. These student opinions should highlight the necessity for instructors to balance class discussions so that all members of the class have a chance to participate and so that over-talkers do not dominate the discussion. Finally, basic course instructors should be careful to delineate arguments from assumptions. Since the distinction between an argument and an assumption is a delicate balance, basic course training programs for instructors must address this difference in order to promote properly guided discussions.

**Cold calling.** Another method of engaging shy or reticent students in discussion is cold calling. Cold calling is the practice of addressing a question to a particular student. In studies involving graduate students, Dallimore et al. (2004, 2006, 2008) strongly recommended the practice of cold calling. As opposed to an open-discussion format, Bean and Peterson (1998) posited that cold calling offers instructors a method of assessing the quality of a student’s response during Socratic examination. However, Fritschner (2000) found a general reluctance on the part of professors to directly question students, which she explained as a factor reinforcing the expectation of reticent students that the “talkers” could be relied on to answer questions or make comments. Basic course instructors, in particular, should be concerned about methods of getting each student to speak during class discussions. Cold calling achieves this objective without resorting to graded par-
participation, but can intimidate students if not done in a random manner or with sensitivity.

**Implications for Future Research and Limitations**

Several important areas for future research emerged from the present study. Initially, quantitative data should be collected to determine the impact of graded participation on student motivation and learning, since it is difficult to assess these variables within the context of a focus group. While our exploratory study provides some guidance in terms of programmatic assessment at our institution, the qualitative nature of our data and the use of a research design employing focus group interviews preclude us from generalizing our findings to other institutions. Second, a number of important variables influence whether graded participation strategies will be perceived positively by students. Researchers would do well to consider how students influence each other in the classroom. For example, a student’s willingness to participate may be dampened by the negative comments of another student in the class.

Third, more culturally diverse samples of students should be used in the future to discover how students from other cultures feel about graded participation. Graded participation strategies should be fair to all groups of students, and must not discriminate against or disadvantage particular segments of students. Instructors clearly need to be able to make accommodations and modifications to their instructional strategies based upon the learning characteristics of their students. Since literature demonstrates that students of different cultures may approach the educational envi-
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environment with different notions of the extent to which they should participate, instructors should consider the effects of graded participation strategies on students from other cultures. Graded participation may disadvantage students from certain cultural backgrounds. Many international students, Balas (2000) explained, come from cultures where it would be considered impolite to interrupt a professor with questions. Additionally, he observed that many international students view actively participating in group discussions as showing off. Students’ willingness to participate may be affected by both gender and culture, but assessment should be fair to all groups and not discriminate (Victoria University of Wellington, 2000). For instance, graded participation is unlikely to fairly and accurately measure the knowledge of culturally diverse classrooms (Balas, 2000).

Fourth, beyond cultural diversity, researchers should consider how instructors might modify participation strategies for students with disabilities. For example, Davis (1993) argues that alternative participation assignments should be arranged for some students with disabilities. She stresses that the range of alternatives must vary with the individual needs of students with disabilities.

Importantly, there were three key limitations to the present study. Initially, the focus group sample in question failed to include a culturally diverse population, thereby excluding the perspectives of students from cultures that tend to view participation as impolite. While the homogenous demographics of our student body prevent us from examining a more culturally diverse sample, future research at other institutions could address
this question. Second, as with any qualitative study employing the use of a focus group design, the results of the present study cannot be generalized to other populations. However, it is important to note that focus groups do offer a valuable means of examining specific graded participation strategies by offering rich data regarding student voices and perceptions. Furthermore, the current study meets established guidelines for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by clearly connecting the findings to extant literature and theory, addressing a topic of importance to all basic course instructors, and proposing appropriate implications (see Weimer, 2006 for a full discussion of these standards).

Future studies could develop survey instruments around the themes discovered in our focus groups to examine student perceptions with a larger, random sample. Finally, the focus group participants in the present study were self-selected volunteers who had admittedly low levels of communication apprehension. Although the focus groups expressed concern for high communication apprehensive classmates and speculated about the point of view of these students, it is possible that reticent students would offer a different perspective. Again, future survey research would offer a means of soliciting feedback from students with communication apprehension.

**CONCLUSION**

The task of eliciting greater participation from students will remain a concern for instructors generally, but will always be of special concern for basic course in-
structors who wish to stimulate student participation during class discussions. In addition to required public speaking performances, the basic course typically aims to generate student participation on a daily basis. But, are graded participation strategies such as the use of participation sheets the proper way to achieve this objective? The results of this study indicate that focus group participants find several drawbacks to using graded participation. Specifically, the focus group members suggested that basic course instructors would be better served to find other means of involving students in class discussions. Furthermore, some students indicated that the use of graded participation functions as a means of eliciting pseudo critical thinking and may even provoke psychological reactance in the form of student silence. Consequently, basic course instructors should carefully reevaluate the strategies they use to encourage student participation during class discussions. For example, Davis (1993) offers several strategies to improve the frequency and quality of student participation, without having to resort to assigning grades. She recommends rewarding student participation, but not grading student participation. While good participation can be used to enhance student grades, scant participation should not be used to lower grades (Balas, 2000). Moreover, future research should seek to determine if the perceptions of students in our focus groups are representative of basic course students at other institutions.
REFERENCES


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Tales of Teaching: Exploring the Dialectical Tensions of the GTA Experience

Jennifer M. Hennings

Today’s GTA staff meeting begins like any other. Our group of 13 Graduate Teaching Associates (GTAs) gathers with our supervisor around our department’s too-small conference table. We gripe about our classes, our students, and our grading for awhile, and ask for each other’s advice. Then our supervisor’s tone becomes more serious. She tells us that several faculty members have complained to the department chair about our behavior in and around our GTA offices. She asks us to think about the types of conversations we’re having, and who can hear us. The 13 of us share two large offices on a faculty hallway. Officially, these offices serve as our faculty workspaces, where we hold office hours, meet with students, develop lesson plans, and trade classroom stories. Yet these offices also serve as de facto student lounges, where we gossip about our graduate seminars, moan loudly about our research, and try unsuccessfully to do our homework amidst a buzz of animated conversations. We live our lives at full volume in these offices, generally with the doors wide open. And apparently this has become too much for some of our colleagues.

We sit silently for a moment, shifting awkwardly in our seats. Then Collin says, “I feel like we just got schooled.”
The double meaning of Collin’s statement strikes me. In the traditional sense of the word, we are indeed being schooled as GTAs, since many of us want to teach at community colleges and universities after we graduate, and our time as GTAs is the ideal training for these teaching positions. Yet in this moment, we also feel schooled in a negative way, like naughty schoolchildren facing our teacher’s wagging finger. As teachers, we are expected to establish good working relationships with our colleagues, to behave professionally in our classrooms, and to manage all of the instructional responsibilities that come with teaching our own courses. Yet as students, we also want to joke with our friends, gossip about professors, and (eventually) get our own homework done. We feel stressed and overwhelmed by the constant juggling of our workloads, and we chafe at the idea of being silenced in our offices, which feel like the only spaces where we can “be ourselves” (i.e., be students).

For me, this story epitomizes the tensions inherent in the GTA role. We are teachers and students at the same time, and these roles present us with opposing desires and responsibilities that we must navigate on a daily basis. Several teaching guides for GTAs (e.g., Curzan & Damour, 2006; Hendrix, 2000) highlight the complexities of this dual role, and research by Feezel and Myers (1997) confirms that this role conflict is a key communication concern for GTAs. Yet while communication studies scholars frequently mention the difficulty of this role conflict for GTAs (see, e.g., Feezel & Myers, 1997; Myers, 1994, 1998; Roach, 2003; Staton & Darling, 1989), few scholars have moved beyond surveys or anecdotal essays to interview GTAs about their experi-
ences of this role conflict. This lack of GTA voice in the research about GTAs leaves us with a limited understanding of how GTAs perceive this role conflict, how it affects their communication with students, peers, and mentors, and how they perceive its impact on their development as educators. By offering a thorough analysis of GTA interviews about this role conflict, this study takes a step toward filling that gap and nuancing our understanding of the GTA experience.

Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) concept of relational dialectics can help us make sense of the tensions inherent in the GTA experience. These scholars explain that our relationships are “organized around the dynamic interplay of opposing tendencies as they are enacted in interaction” (p. 6). They argue that a healthy relationship is not one in which these opposing tensions are eliminated, but rather one in which participants “manage to satisfy both oppositional demands, that is, relationship well-being is marked by the capacity to achieve ‘both/and’ status” (p. 6).

The goal of my research is to use relational dialectics theory to understand how GTAs negotiate the “both/and”-ness of their dual identities as teachers and students. Because extant research has limited our understanding of the GTA experience by sidelining or silencing GTAs’ voices, I have chosen to position GTA voices at the center of this interview study. In doing so, I not only aim to fill a gap in current research, but more importantly, I hope to spark further discussions about GTAs’ experiences. Palmer (1998) highlights the value of teachers engaging in conversation about their teaching instead of practicing privately behind the walls of their own classrooms. I hope that this study will stimu-
late meaningful dialogue between communication studies GTAs and other instructors and supervisors of the introductory course.

In this paper, I will discuss the three dialectical tensions that emerge from GTAs’ interviews about role conflict and identity management: distance-closeness, perfect teacher-perfect student, and structure-freedom. I will analyze the coping strategies that GTAs use to negotiate these perceived tensions, and will discuss the ways in which these tensions appear to affect GTAs’ communication with students, peers, supervisors, friends, and family. To conclude, I will address the implications that these findings have for GTAs, their supervisors, and their students, and will highlight the value of community, mentorship and talking about teaching in GTA training and development programs.

**Literature Review**

In universities across the United States, an increasing number of departments are turning to GTAs to teach or support introductory courses (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990; Shannon, Twale, & Moore, 1998). Some GTAs teach dependent sections of a course taught by another professor, while others are responsible for their own independent sections of an introductory course. Often, universities transfer teaching responsibility to GTAs to give full-time faculty more time to conduct research and teach graduate-level courses (Shannon et al., 1998). While specific data about universities’ uses of GTAs are somewhat outdated, the economic downturn of the past few years suggests that GTA numbers are
Dialectical Tensions of the GTA Experience

not likely to decrease any time soon: a more recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Coplin, 2006) cites the use of TAs as a way for colleges and universities to cut costs. As GTAs assume a larger percentage of university teaching responsibilities, it becomes even more important to understand the tensions and challenges that GTAs face. In this research, I will use Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) theory of relational dialectics as a lens through which to examine these tensions and challenges more closely.

Relational Dialectics Theory

Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) theory of relational dialectics offers an appropriate frame for this research because of its focus on oppositional tensions in relationships. Baxter and Montgomery explain that “the ongoing interplay between oppositional features is what enables a relationship to exist as a dynamic social entity” (p. 6). In further relational dialectics research, Baxter (2004) explains that these oppositional features create tensions that keep us in a constant state of flux; we do not resolve these tensions, but rather we continue to negotiate and struggle with them in our various relationships.

Communication studies scholars have explored dialectical tensions in a variety of contexts: rural Indian health care (Basu & Dutta, 2007), lesbian relationships (Suter & Daas, 2007), stepfamilies (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006), the college classroom (Prentice & Kramer, 2006), and many others. One of the most relevant studies for this research is Prentice and Kramer’s (2006) study of dialectical tensions in a college classroom. They
point out that researchers frequently use dialectics to study dyadic relationships, and their goal in their study is to expand the application of relational dialectics theory by using it to study a group. In this case, the group is the students and professor of a university seminar course. Through participant observation and interviews, they identify three key dialectical tensions that characterize students’ interactions in the course: “(a) their desire to participate and their desire to remain silent during class discussions, (b) their desire for both predictable and novel classroom activities, and (c) managing their personal time and their class time” (p. 339). They discuss various strategies that students use to manage these tensions, and then argue that these tensions can broaden our understanding of the myriad factors that influence student behavior in a classroom.

Yet as Prentice and Kramer (2006) point out, very few communication studies scholars have explored the classroom setting dialectically. Furthermore, none of these scholars appear to have examined GTAs’ experiences from a dialectical perspective. Having seen the utility of this theory in understanding the complexities of a college classroom, I see relational dialectics theory as a useful lens through which to examine the GTA experience.

This study is a new direction for relational dialectics, both in terms of subject matter and the application of the theory. Instead of focusing on a dyad or a classroom, I will use relational dialectics theory to examine the tensions that emerge from a complex web of relationships centered on a single person, the GTA. Picture the GTA as the knot at the center of a web. The other groups of people in the web include students, peers, su-
pervisors, professors, family, friends, and others. As GTAs, our relationships with these different groups of people often involve conflicting desires and expectations. Relational dialectics theory offers a valuable lens through which to examine this “knot of contradictions” (Cornforth, 1968; cited in Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 16) that GTAs must negotiate. Specifically, as GTAs share stories about these webs of relationships, they surface tensions that characterize the GTA experience.

To analyze the strategies that GTAs use to negotiate tensions, I will turn to Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) categorization of functional and less functional strategies that people often use to negotiate dialectical tensions. The two less functional strategies that Baxter and Montgomery identify, denial and disorientation, involve either rejecting one pole of a tension, or resigning oneself to the belief that the tension is inescapable and inherently negative. The six functional strategies include: 1) spiraling inversion, which is moving back and forth between the two poles of a tension over a period of time; 2) segmentation, which is moving back and forth between the two based on the situation, possibly within the same period of time; 3) balance, which is compromising between the poles and fulfilling each one only partly; 4) integration, which is fulfilling each pole fully (this occurs rarely); 5) recalibration, which is reframing the tension so it is no longer perceived as a tension; and 6) reaffirmation, which is embracing the tension and viewing it positively (the opposite of disorientation). Taken together, these strategies offer a useful framework for exploring the strategies that GTAs use to manage dialectical tensions.
Research about GTAs

Extant communication studies research on GTAs can be grouped into three categories: GTA training and supervision, GTA socialization, and GTAs in the classroom. While this research provides valuable insight into the GTA experience, it focuses predominantly on the input of GTA supervisors and undergraduate students, or on the aggregate responses of GTAs on surveys. Our understanding of GTAs will increase greatly as we turn our attention to the insights and wisdom shared by GTAs themselves through individual GTA interviews.

GTA training and supervision

Over the past 30 years, scholars researching GTAs have developed a significant body of research around issues of GTA training and supervision. Numerous researchers have reflected on the effectiveness of GTA training programs at their own universities (e.g., Andrews, 1983; DeBoer, 1979; Staton-Spicer & Nyquist, 1989). Taken together, these essays highlight the importance of several elements of training: a clear definition of the GTA role, observation and critique of GTA teaching, discussion about grading, thorough explanation of the subject matter, and interaction with new and experienced GTAs. Sprague and Nyquist (1989) expand on these essays by offering a conceptual framework for understanding GTAs’ supervision and development. They suggest that GTA supervisors fill three roles (manager, instructional role model, and mentor), and that GTAs evolve through three stages of development (senior learner, colleague-in-training, and junior colleague).
While these scholars ground their writing in their many years of experience as GTA supervisors, the voices of GTAs are troublingly absent from their work. Williams and Roach (1992) take a step toward including GTAs when they survey GTAs about what they perceive to be the most important aspects of their training programs, and their work gives us a broad picture of GTA’s key concerns about their training. Yet only with research that speaks more directly to GTAs can we move from simply knowing what concerns GTAs have to understanding more fully how GTAs negotiate these concerns in their daily lives.

**Socializing GTAs**

Research on GTA socialization aims to define and understand GTAs’ communication concerns as they learn how to fulfill their roles as GTAs. Staton and Darling (1989) argue that GTAs’ socialization occurs through their communication with peers and supervisors, and that GTAs use four communication strategies to socialize themselves: asking questions to obtain information, developing a new social system, adjusting to rules and procedures, and generating new ideas about teaching and research. They stress the importance of creating social opportunities for GTAs and providing GTAs with time to discuss teaching and research so that they can develop as teachers and scholars.

Myers (1994, 1998) builds on Staton and Darling’s (1989) work in his research on GTAs as organizational newcomers. He offers empirical support for Staton and Darling’s claim that peer and faculty relationships are key to GTAs’ socialization (Myers, 1998), and he also
argues that daily interactions with other GTAs and department office staff are some of the socialization activities that GTAs find most important (Myers, 1994). While Myers’ work provides a complement to Staton and Darling’s research, the silence of GTAs in his and others’ socialization research remains a problem. By speaking directly to GTAs, we can more fully understand how GTAs conceptualize and communicate in their roles.

*Studying GTAs in their classrooms*

Most of the studies of GTA classroom communication focus on undergraduate students’ perspectives of GTAs. Experiment-based and survey-based studies of GTA attire (Morris, Gorham, Cohen, & Huffman, 1996; Roach, 1997) offer conflicting opinions about the impact of GTA dress on students’ perceptions of GTAs, while Yook and Albert (1999) use laboratory experiments to argue that intercultural sensitivity training can increase students’ sympathy and decrease anger toward international GTAs. While these studies offer insight into students’ perceptions of GTAs, they not only neglect to explore the GTA perspective, but also take GTA communication out of context by relying on students’ memories or moving teaching to a laboratory setting. In their delineation of relational dialectics theory, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) emphasize the importance of studying communication in its “historical, environmental, cultural, relational, and individual chronotopes, or contexts” (p. 44), and this is something I aim to do by engaging GTAs in direct conversation.
My efforts to put GTA communication in context draws some inspiration from Fitch and Morgan’s (2003) use of interviews to illustrate how students construct international GTAs’ identities through negative narratives. Their analysis of student interviews helps broaden and contextualize our understanding of GTA communication, and I hope to further increase our understanding by introducing GTA voices to this body of research.

The shift toward the GTA perspective has begun to emerge in more recent scholarship, though more work remains to be done. Roach (2003) surveys pre-service GTAs about their levels of anxiety, and asks them to identify potential coping strategies that they might use to address their anxieties as they begin teaching. His study highlights the need for further investigation into GTAs’ actual classroom experiences, so that we can move beyond hypothetical conclusions about how GTAs might respond to anxieties and learn more about GTAs actually negotiate these challenges in their teaching. Hendrix, Hebbani, and Johnson (2007) provide the most complex portrait of GTAs from the GTA perspective. Their study explores the experiences of GTAs of color (GTACs) in predominantly White universities, and uses individual interviews to identify differences between the experiences of GTACs and White GTAs. They find that GTACs not only feel more of a need to prove their own credibility in the classroom, but they also express a greater awareness of their own racial identities in the classroom and a greater feeling of responsibility to educate their students about racial issues. In addition, their analysis of GTA interviews provides much-needed insight into how GTAs perceive their own communication.
In their conclusion, Hendrix and her colleagues call for more research that will provide “a more inclusive and realistic view of life in academe” (Hendrix et al., 2007, p. 75). I hope to respond to this summons by continuing down the “road less traveled” in GTA research. The goal of this study is to move beyond explaining and predicting the effects of GTA communication on students’ perceptions, and to use relational dialectics theory to illuminate the complex web of communicative tensions that characterize GTAs’ identities. To address the lack of GTA voice in this area of research, I asked RQ1: How do GTAs articulate challenges and concerns about their roles as GTAs? Then, I used Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) relational dialectics theory as a framework to address RQ2: What tensions emerge from GTAs’ stories of role conflict and identity management? Finally, since the goal of this research is to provide practical suggestions for GTAs and other instructors and supervisors of the introductory course, I asked RQ3: What implications do these perceived tensions have for GTA training, supervision, and mentorship?

**METHOD**

GTAs have been surveyed, paraphrased, and quantified, but rarely heard. For this reason, I chose interviews as a way to incorporate the richness and wisdom of GTA voices into the study of GTA communication. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explain, interviews are “particularly well suited to understand the social actor’s experience and perspective” (p. 173; authors’ emphasis). I interviewed 10 GTAs who were simultaneously pursu-
ing master's degrees and fulfilling teaching roles in their department. I chose this number of GTAs based on the work of Kvale (2007), who cites 15 (±10) as a standard number for interview sampling, due generally to researchers’ time constraints as well as the law of diminishing returns (p. 44). In this study, by the time I reached the tenth interview, I did discover saturation in terms of the themes that emerged.

Using convenience sampling, I met GTAs from two large, public universities on the West Coast. These GTAs were from three different departments: English (two GTAs), Foreign Language (two GTAs), and Communication Studies (six GTAs). The GTAs consisted of seven females and three males, and they ranged in age from 23 to about 50. Their ethnicities were: seven White/Caucasian (three self-reported; four White-appearing), one Italian/White, one Jewish, and one Indian. All of these GTAs were the sole instructors of record for their assigned courses, meaning that they were the only instructors with whom students interacted for their courses. Each interview lasted between 60 and 75 minutes, and was audio recorded and transcribed. I obtained IRB approval for all interviews, and asked each interviewee to choose a pseudonym. As recommended by Kvale (2007), I grouped my interview questions in a way that indicates which interview questions are associated with each research question.

To guide my analysis, I looked to previous dialectical research by Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) and Prentice and Kramer (2006). First, I read all of the transcripts several times so that I was familiar with the entire collection of interviews. As I read each transcript, I made note of stories, issues, or concepts that stood out as sali-
ent in each interview. While the decision of what is and what is not “salient” in research is ultimately a subjective decision, I made my decision of salience based on how much emphasis a GTA placed on a topic when she or he was talking. For example, I noted when a GTA spoke with particular energy or emotion about a topic, and also noticed when GTAs returned to or re-emphasized a topic over the course of the interview. After identifying examples of salient topics, my second step was an “inductive process in which a given datum [was] compared to prior data for its similarity or difference” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 35). If a new example was similar to existing examples, I added it to an existing category. If it was different, I created a new category. Then, like Prentice and Kramer (2006), I reviewed these categories to see what tensions emerged as most significant across the set of GTA interviews. I chose this inductive approach because it honors GTAs’ voices as sources of meaningful and relevant knowledge. By not pre-imposing categories on my analysis, I made room for GTAs’ interviews to surface tensions that may not otherwise have emerged from current research on GTAs or dialectical tensions.

**FINDINGS**

One of the reasons I started this research was to try to make sense of the stress and anxiety that I experienced as a GTA. Since I entered graduate school with prior teaching experience, I expected to move smoothly and confidently into my role as a GTA. Instead, I often felt nervous and self-doubting, even in my fourth and
last semester as a GTA. During these interviews, I found myself nodding, laughing, and wincing as these GTAs reflected and echoed my own frustrations in their stories about their teaching, their graduate work, their personal lives, and the intersections of these areas. Also, GTAs from both within and outside of communication studies all shared similar stories of stress, frustration, and triumph, reminding me that the challenge of teaching an introductory course as a graduate student is a challenge that extends beyond my own discipline. While there are many interesting themes that emerged from these interviews, I will focus here on the three dialectical tensions that stand out as most significant across the set of interviews as a whole: 1) the desire for both distance and closeness with students, 2) the desire to be both a perfect teacher and a perfect student, and 3) the desire for both structure and freedom within the GTA role.

**The Distance-Closeness Dialectic: “Cracking the Whip” and Being their Friend**

The distance-closeness dialectic emerges from GTAs’ conflicting desires to be both authority figures and confidantes in the classroom. At least half of the GTAs I spoke with say they need to establish an authoritative, credible presence in the classroom, which requires a degree of distance from students. As one GTA explains, it is difficult to be an authority in the classroom if your students see you merely as one of them. Yet nearly every GTA also talks about wanting to connect personally with students and to make a difference in students’ lives. This type of connection requires a closeness that
comes into direct conflict with GTAs’ desire to maintain distance and authority.

Desiring distance from students

Of the different reasons that GTAs gave for using distance to establish authority, age and self-doubt stand out as their two most pressing concerns. Edna, a 23-year-old GTA, explains that she was not prepared for “the fact that [students are] going to look at me and say, ‘Hmm, she seems young and naive.’ So, I had to come up with a little bit more of a persona in the classroom to gain authority.” Rebecca, a 25-year-old GTA, shares Edna’s concern: “I was really worried about being or looking too young, and my students not respecting my authority. I think that’s a common concern with GTAs.” Because of her concerns about her age, Rebecca has chosen not to “out” herself as a GTA to her students. She also jokes about “cracking the whip” with her students as a means of establishing control, though she acknowledges that this authoritative mindset can be “problematic.” Edna says she creates an authoritative persona in the classroom by demonstrating her expertise in the subject: “I just sort of started opening my brain and showing that I have all of this knowledge. It doesn’t matter how old you are. It’s just the fact that I still have things that I can teach you.”

Many of the GTAs I spoke with also identified self-doubt as a factor that influences their desire for authoritative distance in the classroom. While several of the GTAs in this study were teaching assistants during their undergraduate years, only two had taught their own courses before becoming GTAs. As a result, some of
them spoke about establishing authority in the classroom as a means of masking their own self-doubt. Joe explains, “Standing at the front of the classroom for the first time independently is a challenge. You need to present yourself as the authority, [as though] you know what you’re talking about, and there is the constant threat of self-doubt.” Hannah, a first-year GTA, says while that “you doubt yourself constantly” as a first-year GTA, she finds reassurance in turning to second-year GTAs who seem more confident. Indeed, many of the second-year GTAs speak about their self-doubt primarily in the past tense.

Desiring closeness with students

Despite their reasons for staying distant from students, all of the GTAs also talk about wanting to make a difference in their students’ lives and wanting their students to like them, both of which involve closeness. For GTAs, making a difference involves more than just teaching course material. Angelica sums up this desire by saying, “In my role as a teacher, it’s not just teaching the subject, but somehow touching their lives, somehow making an impact. . . . I really take it as like I’m their teacher but I’m also kind of their friend.” When I asked GTAs about the most rewarding part of their GTA experience, nearly every one of them talked about the relationships they have developed with their students. Thomas mentions that he is happy to be the person his students turn to with questions or concerns about family, money, commuting, or sexual health. And while GTAs are not the only instructors who want to support students, their student identities often help them relate
to students on a personal level. Alois explains, “I understand their experience because I’m still having it a little bit. I really want to be able to help them negotiate their identity as students because I haven’t let go of being a student completely yet.”

While this desire to get more involved in students’ lives seems to stem from GTAs’ desire to make a difference, it also seems to relate to their desire for student approval, a common topic of conversation. Hannah worries that her students won’t like her because she has high expectations of them, and says that she tries to make herself likable by using humor. Beth explains that she tries to connect with her students by “act[ing] like I am one of them or something. . . . I’m probably a little bit more laid back, a little less professional-seeming from other [instructors].” This quest for approval has benefits as well as drawbacks. Mickie says she solicits frequent feedback from her students so she can use this feedback to become a stronger, more effective instructor. In contrast, Thomas describes his first semester of teaching as a time when he was overly malleable and didn’t say no to his students. He attributes his lenience to his lack of confidence in his own teaching instincts, and now encourages other GTAs to “say no” and to not second-guess themselves in front of students, since it caused problems in his class.

Strategies for navigating the distance-closeness dialectic

Despite the fact that many GTAs express a desire to be an authority in the classroom, their desire for closeness with students generally wins out. While many
GTAs talk about struggling to set limits with students, no one mentions any difficulties in connecting with students or building relationships. Thus, the challenge that most GTAs face in negotiating this tension is figuring out how to put boundaries on their closeness.

**Starting out strict.** For Joe, the key to negotiating this dialectic is portraying himself as strict at the beginning of the semester, and then lightening up later on. He says, “Because I’m a young person, I try to present a very hard-lined bull right out of the gates, because it’s important to me that these students know that I’m their instructor and not their friend. This isn’t playtime.” His movement between distance and closeness over time reflects Baxter and Montgomery’s (2006) idea of spiraling inversion. Joe explains that his strategy stems from his tendency to care too much: “It’s difficult not to become attached to these men and women that you’re interacting with. However, at times, the investment is too big and the connection is too strong.” Thus, by performing the role of “hard-lined bull” at the outset, Joe is able to get enough distance from his students, and they can then interact throughout the semester in a constructive way. Joe’s insight invites GTAs to reflect on how they might maintain enough emotional distance and perspective so that they can fulfill their roles as instructors and maintain a healthy balance in their own lives.

**Striking a balance.** Rebecca navigates this tension by trying to be rigorous without being rigid. She explains, “I feel like I struggle with tensions as a teacher. I want to be compassionate—and that’s the one that wins—but then I also try the opposite. You have to hold them accountable.” She knows that sacrificing her high academic standards would be a “disservice” to her stu-
dent, so instead, she tries to “keep [her standards] in mind, but also not be a total stickler for every little thing.” Beth takes a similar approach: she is committed to correcting students’ grammar in her language class, but she explains that

I try to not be too correcting. I think that can be intimidating. . . [if you] correct everything at once. You can choose [to focus on] a certain point or certain pronunciation point without making them afraid to open their mouths ever again.

Here, Beth and Rebecca demonstrate Baxter and Montgomery’s (2006) strategy of balance by fulfilling certain desires for academic rigor and compromising in other areas. While each GTA will draw her or his own line between rigorous and rigid, this strategy offers us the chance to consider what standards matter most to us.

**The Perfect Teacher-Perfect Student Dialectic: “I’m Always Late, and I’m Hungry”**

The tension that GTAs feel between distance and closeness can stem from a desire to be what Angelica calls a “transformative” teacher, which she defines as the teacher whom every student remembers. But this quest for teaching excellence is complicated by our desire to succeed as graduate students. We struggle to meet our high expectations for ourselves as both teachers and students while also balancing our needs for sleep, socializing, humanity, and mental health. Over and over again, GTAs tell me that there is simply *not enough time*. Beth sums it up perfectly in the quote
that opens this section: “I’m always late, and I’m hungry.” I call this second tension the perfect teacher—perfect student dialectic. We get frustrated that we can’t invest ourselves fully in the role of either student or teacher, and we have to make sacrifices to get it all done.

**Being the perfect student**

GTAs are often selected for their roles because of their outstanding performance as students (Sprague & Nyquist, 1989). When I ask GTAs to describe themselves as students, many are quick to categorize themselves as perfectionists and workaholics. Hannah tells me, “I take my student life really seriously. I study six days a week, all the time if possible. . . . I’m obsessed with being a perfect student and doing things perfectly.” In addition to getting good grades, several GTAs mention the joy of being nominated for academic honor societies or receiving praise from professors. Because GTAs value these acknowledgements, they continue to strive for excellence in their scholarly work, despite the new strains that teaching adds to their schedules.

Other GTAs explain that being a great student is critical for career success. Frances explains that she is very focused on getting good grades because “being a good student right now will make it possible for me to be a good teacher in the future.” As much as these GTAs love teaching, they also need to focus on their student work so that they can complete their degrees and get the full-time teaching jobs that many of them want. As Joe says, “Being a teaching associate is an exciting opportunity, but without getting my master of arts degree,
that experience would be for naught. I’m not going to be able to get work in this field without a degree.” Ultimately, then, a GTA’s attempts to be a perfect student can also help her or him achieve the goal of becoming a full-time teacher.

While this perfectionism did not surprise me, one thing that does is the fact that many GTAs define themselves more as students than as teachers. Since GTAs often talk about how their teaching work can dominate and overwhelm their student work, I expected GTAs to describe themselves more as teachers than as students. Most of these GTAs, however, identified more strongly with the identity of student. Angelica explains:

I see myself as a teacher and identify myself as that. That is part of my identity. But maybe... I identify myself as a student more because I’ve been a student for longer, obviously a lot longer. It takes up more of my time. I’m teaching, but I’m not right where I need to be yet. . . . [Teaching is] all a bit new. So, maybe that’s why I don’t identify myself as much with it, but... when people ask me what I do, I always talk about both of them together, student and teacher. It comes up in all of my conversations. I don’t leave the teaching part out.

Angelica’s narrative reveals the interplay between her two identities. She identifies more with her role as a student because it feels more familiar and defined, whereas her teaching identity is still evolving. Yet she still describes herself as both teacher and student, which is also true for all of the other GTAs.
As students who are familiar with success, GTAs often crave the same level of accomplishment in their own classrooms. For many of these GTAs, the key to succeeding as a teacher is being prepared for the public performance in the classroom, even at the expense of one’s own homework. Beth explains, “The teaching does dominate, because you are in front of people... I can show up for one of my own classes, unprepared, and just kind of hope I don’t get too bad of a grade.” Rebecca shares a similar concern: “I feel like I have to pick teacher over student because there are 30 kids relying on me, and if I went in there and did a really horrible job... I would feel so bad about that.” Both Rebecca and Beth distinguish between the public failure of not teaching well and the private failure of not succeeding as a student. While Rebecca says that she does not have to make the choice very often, she nevertheless makes it clear that she would choose her public responsibilities as a teacher over her private responsibilities as a student.

For Edna and other GTAs, getting behind in grading seems to be less of a concern, since it does not affect their public performance in the classroom. Edna explains, “If it’s grading, I’ll do my own stuff [first]... But if it’s something like lesson planning, then no, I’ll leave my reading to the end, because I’m someone that always has to be prepared in the classroom.” Even Angelica, who talks about wanting to achieve perfection as a teacher and a student, admits that she will put off grading if she needs to get her own work done, because “there are some things that you can be flexible with, and
some things that you can’t.” Grading is the most common place where GTAs confess to falling behind as teachers, even though they acknowledge that grading is an important part of investing in students’ success. The biggest hurdle to GTAs’ success as teacher is often their ability to manage their time. As Mickie says, “Time management, I think, is the key to being a good TA.”

Strategies for negotiating the perfect teacher-perfect student dialectic

Compartmentalizing. Many GTAs seek to compartmentalize their roles in their quest to succeed, meaning that they divide their time and attention to focus on one role at a time. This strategy correlates to Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) concept of segmentation. As Joe explains, “I guess I compartmentalize both roles. So there are times when I’m really an instructor, and that’s what I’m doing, and there are times when I’m a student, and that’s really what I’m doing.” While this may sound like a logical strategy, GTAs are quick to explain that compartmentalizing their roles is a difficult task. Alois, who holds a research position in his department in addition to being a GTA and a student, explains, “I tried to compartmentalize the three identities, and did not realize that they do struggle with each other as much as they complement each other and support each other.”

Edna voices a similar frustration about juggling her roles, and says that “probably the best thing I could have ever thought of” was deciding to teach on days she does not have graduate seminars. That way, she explains, “I wouldn’t have to go, ‘Okay, I just taught a
whole lesson on feminism, and now in an hour I have to go my own class. It was very difficult to switch gears for me.” While not all GTAs have this luxury, the idea of teaching and taking classes on different days could be a good way to compartmentalize.

**Compromising.** In addition to compartmentalizing, many GTAs also find themselves making frustrating compromises to achieve Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) notion of balance. As I began this research, my own tendency was to compromise my student work and prioritize my teaching work, and I expected to hear other GTAs say that they do the same thing. Instead, I found that many GTAs either compromise each role equally, or sacrifice their personal lives so they can avoid compromising either of their academic roles. Alois tells me, “I think I’ve [compromised] equivalently, like, ‘Okay, I’m going to not find three more articles for that research paper, but I’m also going to spend five minutes less per hour [on grading].’” Similarly, Rebecca says she would never skip class to grade students’ papers, but she might choose to read “just 3 of the 4” articles for one of her own classes to finish grading.

For several GTAs, though, sacrificing personal life feels more comfortable than making academic compromises. Angelica tells me that she often cancels plans with her friends at the last minute so that she can “hibernate in my home” to get her work done. Similarly, Mickie says she often sacrifices “quality time with my husband,” while Beth says, “I don’t really have any social life. . . . I don’t really have the time.” Although cutting out time with friends and family may feel like a necessary sacrifice, it also takes its toll. Angelica explains, “Sometimes I don’t feel as mentally healthy as I
need to be because I think schooling can be very drain-
ing and very stressful for me. . . Sometimes I feel educa-
tion can dictate my life.” Even though she says that “I
really enjoy education, and I’m doing this for a reason; I
want to be here,” she also shares her concern that her
sacrificial coping strategy may not be sustainable in the
long run.

Changing your attitude. While some GTAs suc-
cumb to sacrifice, others manage this tension by
changing their attitude, or what Baxter and Montgom-
ery (1996) would call reaffirmation. This change seems
to be a direct response to their conflicting desires for
perfection. While these GTAs strive for excellence, they
also emphasize the importance of not taking things too
seriously. In offering advice to new GTAs, Joe says:

If you don’t take your effect on [your students] so seri-
ously, you will be able to keep some distance. Under-
stand that you are one of many instructors, you’re
doing the best that you can. And if they don’t get it all
now, it’s a bummer, but you don’t need to commit
hari-kari because you’ve dishonored the emperor, you
know what I mean?

Here, Joe recognizes that the work he does is important,
but that he must maintain a realistic perspective about
the role he plays in his students’ lives. Alois shares a
similar perspective: “I don’t take it [teaching] too seri-
ously, even if I take it seriously as I take anything else.
You know. . . I laugh at myself when I take teaching too
seriously. There’s a value in that.” For both Joe and
Alois, the decision to not take things seriously helps
them be more balanced in their approaches to school.
Edna, who also advocates a less serious attitude, ex-
plains, “I’ve always been a very casual person, and so I
try to keep that sense of fun or spontaneity in the classroom. . . . I try to have a rapport with my students.” She goes on to say that her light-hearted attitude improves her relationships with students and helps her create an engaging classroom climate. While this type of attitude shift will not eliminate GTAs’ time management conundrums, it may help GTAs relieve some of the anxiety that comes from trying to achieve perfection.

The Structure-Freedom Dialectic: Hold Me Up, Let Me Fly

The first two tensions that I have discussed focus mainly on GTAs’ relationships with other people. Distance-closeness addresses the tenor of GTAs’ relationships with students, while perfect teacher-perfect student addresses GTAs’ relationships with themselves, their students, and their professors. In contrast with these more personal tensions, the third tension that emerges from these interviews is often more of a structural tension. GTAs seem to experience this tension not so much in relationship with a particular person or group of people, but rather in relationship with the overall structure of their training programs, departments, or their universities. This tension, which I will call structure-freedom, stems from GTAs’ conflicting desires to have structure and support as they teach, and to have freedom to be creative and to shape their classrooms according to their own interests.
Desiring structure

As new teachers, GTAs desire a certain amount of structure to support them as they develop their confidence. Angelica, a first-year GTA, is happy that her department “put together a system so that we weren’t just thrown into the classroom. They give us a format like, ‘This is your syllabus. Here are your [assignments]. This is what they look like.” After teaching with this structure for a semester, Angelica felt more confident about rearranging certain aspects of her course to better suit her interests. Like Angelica, Beth is thankful that her department chair offered her a plan of what pages to cover each day in her introductory language course. She says, “Having that guide laid out is really, really helpful. And I would say that I recommend that in any department, rather than just having the TAs trying to figure it out all on their own.”

Another benefit of structure is that it can give GTAs confidence to make changes in their classrooms once they have more experience. Like many other GTAs I met, Alois was required to use an assigned syllabus during his first semester of teaching. He says, “The framework of the class was so useful. And I think that was what empowered me in my second year to really fuck with the course, to really tweak it.” Thus, Alois sees this initial structure as a foundation that helped him adapt and change his course later on.

Even GTAs who advocate for less structure acknowledge that some structure is necessary because GTAs teach introductory courses that need to meet general education requirements. Joe explains, “There is a pretty strict set of policies that composition instructors are re-
required to follow, and those are included in the syllabus. . . which works in many ways. There needs to be a rhetoric, if you will, a standard.” Despite his overall preference for more freedom, Joe acknowledges that certain guidelines help the university ensure continuity across different sections of the same introductory course.

Desiring freedom

While structure can feel empowering to new GTAs, more experienced GTAs often yearn for the freedom to experiment and take risks in their classes. This tension between structure and freedom is reminiscent of the predictability-novelty dialectic that emerged from Pruncheon and Kramer’s (2006) ethnographic classroom study, in which students appreciated the predictable structure of each class period but also liked the variety of activities that their instructor introduced each day. Similarly, GTAs’ tension between structure and freedom emerges when they talk about the organization and content of their courses. Hannah talks about how she does not agree with every element of the assigned curriculum for her course:

I teach what I’m supposed to teach, but I might tell them that it doesn’t always work this way. I want them to be keeping in mind that [persuasion is] contingent all the time. It depends on so many different things. And also, I think it might kill their creativity in speeches if we give them too strict guidelines.

Here, Hannah navigates the dialectic in two ways. First, she finds freedom within a prescribed curriculum by qualifying and contextualizing the top of persuasion. Second, she tries to find a balance between giving as-
Like Hannah, Joe is happy to be able to shape his class to match his interests. Because of his seniority as a second-year GTA, he is able to replace some of the short stories in his syllabus with one of his favorite full-length non-fiction books. He says that this was “very exciting, to be able to invest a little bit more of myself into the syllabus and choose something, you know a book, a work of art.” He identifies this freedom as a characteristic of successful GTA programs:

I think it’s important not to have total free reign, not like you can do whatever you want, but to create a kind of base and to allow each individual TA to work with those fundamentals as he or she would like. Because you are giving people the opportunity to invest themselves in what they’re doing, and that brings out the best in people.

Joe sees freedom as a necessary condition for creativity, and mentions this repeatedly during his interview. Rebecca expresses similar concerns when she says that the ideal GTA training program “would give you enough practical [guidance] to not make you feel like you’re going to die of uncertainty and just like feel like you’re drowning, but not give so much [structure] that that starts to becomes your focus.” The enthusiasm that GTAs express for their freedom in the classroom is worth nothing, because granting GTAs this freedom is likely to help them be even more invested in their teaching.
Strategies for navigating the structure-freedom dialectic

GTAs generally negotiate the tension between structure and freedom by taking increasing advantage of the unique “job security” that comes with being a GTA. In doing so, they demonstrate Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) strategy of reaffirmation by reframing their tension as a valuable opportunity. With the first strategy, occupying a unique position, GTAs use reaffirmation to look more positively on their positions as GTAs, focusing more on the unique freedoms of the position instead of dwelling on its structural limitations. With the second strategy, sanctioned and covert risk-taking, GTAs also reframe the structure-freedom dialectic by using their GTA position as a chance to experiment as teachers.

Occupying a unique position. Several GTAs highlight the fact that GTAs have more latitude than other instructors because they are still students. When asked what advice she would give to new GTAs, Frances says:

Try to learn everything that you can learn while you are a GTA, because you have a little bit of room to make mistakes, and as soon as you are not a GTA, I think that space diminishes. And so learn from your mistakes to make them more valuable... and also appreciate that GTAs are set up for a learning experience—it’s kind of that liminal space between student and teacher.

Frances points out that since GTAs are having a “learning experience,” they are more able to experiment because people expect them to make mistakes. She encourages GTAs to “own your class, and own your syllabus, and don’t be afraid to use your expertise and offer
something that students might not get in another class.” Edna also talks about the latitude and job security that comes from being a GTA, and says that she takes advantage of this freedom to try out different classroom personas and teaching styles: “Sometimes I will try group work or lecturing, like, students have no idea of what’s going to come at them that day. Sometimes, it’s games. . . . I mean it’s just, you know, different ways they can be interested.” If GTAs are experimenting with different teaching methods and looking for new ways to engage their students in the course material, they can become more versatile, adaptable teachers, a characteristic that ultimately benefits their students.

Sanctioned vs. covert risk-taking. GTAs also respond to the structure-freedom tension by experimenting with risk-taking in their teaching. Many of the risks that GTAs discuss are decisions that have been sanctioned by their supervisors. When Edna decided that one of her course textbooks was too expensive and “over [her students’] heads,” she and several other GTAs “revolted, and chose a completely different book,” with their supervisor’s approval. The advantage of having their supervisors’ support is that it makes GTAs feel even more confident about taking risks. Similarly, Alois expresses praise for his supervisor because “I’m pretty sure our supervisor articulated that. . . you could really mess it up and it’s not the end of the world. So I went into it with a risk-taking attitude of, ‘Wow, if I really stink it up, that’s great.” In both cases, these GTAs characterize their relationships with their supervisors as open, involved, and encouraging, which seem to encourage risk-taking.
GTAs with supervisors who are less involved or less supportive are more inclined to take covert risks. Beth, who describes her supervisor as “breathing down her neck,” says that her supervisor does not like the idea of Beth including supplementary exercises from the Internet in her lesson plans. I got the sense from our conversation, though, that she continues to integrate these exercises into her course without telling him. Thomas, meanwhile, is assigned to a different faculty mentor each semester, and has infrequent contact with his course director. This means he generally takes risks without seeking their advice. When the course director pointed out that he had forgotten to include certain required concepts in his syllabus, he says that he agreed to revise his syllabus, but then continued to teach in exactly the same way as before. He explains, “I have addressed [the required concepts]. I just don’t do it like the way it says in the book. . . . Anyways, like I said, they would never know if I did or if I didn’t.”

Whether or not GTAs feel supported by their supervisors in their risk-taking, all of them identify this risk-taking as central to their growth as educators. As such, this is an important strategy for GTAs to consider when negotiating the tension between structure and freedom.

**IMPLICATIONS**

**Strengths and Limitations**

One of the strengths of this study is that it explores a new application of relational dialectics theory, focusing on discourse about a web of relationships instead of from a dyad or a single classroom group. It also co-
Dialectical Tensions of the GTA Experience

implements existing GTA research by providing insight into the successes and struggles of GTAs from the perspective of GTAs themselves. The most important idea here is that GTAs do not have to resolve these opposing tensions by choosing one side over the other. Instead, as GTAs experiment with coping strategies like segmentation, spiraling inversion, balance, and reaffirmation, they find ways to be demanding and compassionate, successful and balanced, structured and creative.

While some researchers might see the number of participants in this study as a limitation, the goal of this study is not to generalize about all GTAs. Instead, the value of this study lies in its ability to complement and complicate quantitative studies by looking more deeply at the knowledge and wisdom that emerges from GTAs’ own stories. For example, as mentioned earlier, Roach (2003) asks pre-service GTAs to identify coping strategies they think they might use to address their anxieties when they start teaching. My research expands on this type of study by exploring the different coping strategies that GTAs actually use to manage their perceived tensions. By delving into the richness of GTAs’ stories, we come to understand how and why GTAs negotiate their experiences the way they do.

Advice for Communication Studies GTAs and Supervisors

While this study engaged GTAs from three different departments, these interviews show that GTAs from within and outside communication studies share similar concerns and experience similar tensions in their navigation of the student-teacher duality. Two of the most
critical factors that emerge from these interviews are community and mentorship. When engaged thoughtfully by communication studies GTAs and their supervisors, these two factors can go a long way toward helping GTAs navigate their roles with confidence.

Cultivating community

As communication studies GTAs, we are responsible for teaching our students the foundational elements of communication. Whether we are comparing pathos, logos, and ethos, or discussing the intricacies of interpersonal communication, we help our students develop the skills they need to succeed in both public and private communication. At the same time, as new teachers and scholars in the communication studies field, we need a supportive community of peers, mentors, and supervisors in which we can discuss the foundational elements of pedagogy and develop the skills we need to succeed as scholars and educators.

Every GTA in this study talks about the importance of her or his relationships with other GTAs. Hannah identifies her GTA cohort as a “really solid support network” that helps her learn and grow as a teacher and a student, while Alois mentions the “bitch sessions that are so important,” both for letting off steam and getting advice from other GTAs. This supports previous research that highlighted relationships with peers and supervisors as essential to GTAs’ socialization (Myers, 1994, 1998; Staton & Darling, 1989).

Other GTAs who are not as close to their peers express a desire to nurture these relationships. Beth is frustrated that she hardly ever sees her fellow GTAs,
and she would appreciate regular meetings that would give her the chance to exchange ideas for classroom activities and lesson plans. Frances, too, wishes there had been more interaction between her and other GTAs during her first semester of teaching, so that she could have received more advice and not struggled through challenges alone. Hendrix et al. (2007) highlight the value of regular, mandatory GTA meetings where both “pedagogical and discipline-related issues can be promoted” (p. 65). Meetings would give GTAs like Beth a chance to develop the supportive community that GTAs cite as crucial to their survival.

Finding mentors

While GTAs’ relationships with peers are important sources of personal and professional support, they also need more experienced mentors to support their development as teachers. For some GTAs, this mentor may be her or his GTA supervisor, while for others, it is a more experienced GTA or another faculty member. Alois explains that having a mentor is important because you can approach her or him with “the real practical [questions] you don’t realize to ask until the morning you’re going to teach your class.” Edna says that her supervisor is a valuable mentor because “he tries very hard to troubleshoot. Obviously, he can’t be there every moment of the day, but . . . he’s going to say, ‘Okay, in a real teaching situation how would we take care of this?’”

Like Hendrix et al. (2007) and Sprague and Nyquist (1989), nearly all of the GTAs in this study mention the importance of having a mentor who cares about teaching. Some GTAs express frustration that their assigned
faculty mentors show little or no interest in observing their classes or sharing constructive feedback. It is disheartening for a new teacher to have a mentor who treats the task like an unwelcome burden. Thus, it is crucial for communication studies departments to hire GTA supervisors who care about pedagogy and the mentorship of new teachers, and for these supervisors to consider pairing GTAs with mentors who will take an active interest in GTAs’ development as educators.

**Suggestions for Coping with Tensions**

While having a strong community and thoughtful mentorship will position communication studies GTAs for success, GTAs also need to consider how they will confront dialectical tensions when they arise.

**Talk about teaching**

As GTAs, one of the greatest gifts that we can give each other in our communities is the willingness to make teaching a public practice instead of a private one. Palmer (1998) writes about teaching as the most private of public professions: although teachers always practice their craft in front of other people (students), they rarely invite their colleagues into their classrooms (p. 142). He contrasts teachers with other professionals like lawyers and doctors, who practice their crafts in front of one another, and thus are more likely to hold each other to certain standards of performance. Tompkins (1990) offers a similar and striking metaphor when she writes, “Teaching was exactly like sex for me—something you weren’t supposed to talk about or focus on in any way...
but that you were supposed to be able to do properly when the time came” (p. 655).

Like Tompkins and Palmer, all of the GTAs I met speak about the value of talking with other GTAs about teaching. Beth mentions that these exchanges “improve the possibility of instruction,” while Angelica says they “open new possibilities for the teacher next to [you].” As new teachers, we need the chance to talk about what we love about teaching and what frustrates us. It is important for GTAs to invest energy in these types of conversations, and it is equally important for supervisors to build these conversations into the structure of GTA programs.

Celebrate the liminalities of the GTA role

In addition to talking about teaching, we would do well as GTAs to embrace the liminalities of our role. While our role feels fraught with tension, the idea of celebrating this experience arose in several interviews, and relates to Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) notion of reaffirmation. Earlier, I discussed how some GTAs use their GTA position as an opportunity to take supported, incremental risks in the classroom. Our liminal status offers us other valuable opportunities that we can embrace. For example, Thomas tells me that when he is having trouble understanding a topic from one of his graduate seminars, he often takes his questions to his own students. He explains, “I’m coming in almost aligning myself with them, like, ‘This stuff’s confusing me. What do you all think?’ Interestingly enough, I have gotten much better answers to things from my [undergraduate] students [compared to graduate seminars].”
By engaging his students in a shared learning process, Thomas not only expands his own understanding of core concepts from his discipline, but he also “aligns” himself with his students and uses this questioning as a way of establishing rapport with them. Instead of pretending to have all of the answers, we can instead embrace our identities as students and new teachers, and use these identities to join with our students in the creation of knowledge. This idea relates to Freire’s (1970/2003) philosophy of problem-posing education, in which “the teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself [sic] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 80). If, as GTAs, we can practice embracing our roles as teacher-students, we can cultivate healthy habits of problem-posing in our classrooms that will serve us well in our futures as educators.

**Implications for Students and Educators**

Supporting GTAs as educators is particularly important because of the impact that it can have on students. Like their counterparts in other departments, communication studies GTAs teach introductory courses, which means that they are often one of the first instructors that students meet within that department, or even that university. (During my department’s GTA training, we often remind each other that we’re not just teaching public speaking, we’re also teaching students “how to do college.”) The experiences that students have in a GTA’s classroom are likely to have an impact on their percep-
tions of that GTA’s department and the university as a whole. Thus, it is important to pay close attention to GTAs’ development as instructors, so as to ensure the best possible learning environment for their students. For example, if GTAs learn to take thoughtful risks in the classroom (as the GTAs in this study advise), they can become more supple and innovative educators.

Moreover, since all but one of the GTAs I met plan to continue their careers as educators, I believe we can contribute to the overall success and welfare of post-secondary instructors by addressing the needs and concerns of GTAs. From my casual conversations with other lecturers and professors, it appears that the tension between distance and closeness with students is a tension with which many educators grapple. And while tenure-track professors and lecturers do not experience the perfect teacher-perfect student tension exactly as GTAs do, they nevertheless face the conflicting desires to focus on and excel in teaching, research, and university service. Thus, by helping GTAs learn to negotiate these tensions in constructive ways, we can help school them in the “best pedagogical practices” that will continue to serve them well throughout their teaching careers.

**Directions for Future Research**

This is an exploratory study that points to many other possible veins of GTA research. In the interest of bridging the gap between quantitative and qualitative GTA research, it would be valuable to use these interview studies to develop a survey instrument that could be offered to GTAs nationwide. By pairing in-depth interview studies with broader survey data, we can de-
velop an even more holistic understanding of the GTA experience and can provide better support to GTAs.

Several GTAs in the study also pointed out the value of doing a longitudinal interview study of GTAs, e.g., interviewing GTAs when they first start teaching, when they are more experienced GTAs, and then when they move on to full-time teaching. This type of study could offer even greater insight into the long-term effects and benefits of GTA training programs, and would further clarify the factors that have the greatest positive influence on GTAs as educators.

Final Thoughts

As suggested by Collin’s words in the opening, our time as GTAs is a fertile time for schooling. We school our students in the intricacies of our discipline, while we too are being schooled: schooled in how to be graduate students, how to be teachers, how to be scholars, and how, ultimately, to perform the delicate juggling act between our multiple roles. One of the most valuable things we can do—as GTAs, as supervisors, as communication studies scholars—is to encourage the sharing and discussion of these experiences. As we explore and analyze GTAs’ tales of teaching and learning, struggling and thriving, compromising and balancing, we can better understand the tensions that GTAs face. In turn, we can create training programs that support and nurture GTAs as educators, and that ultimately contribute to the thoughtfulness and engagement of future generations of university faculty.
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Assessing the Impact of Learning Communities as an Alternative Delivery Model for the Public Speaking Course

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During the last two decades, American colleges and universities have come under increasing pressure to increase their student retention, progression and graduation rates. As a result, programs that provide enhanced academic and/or peer support for first-year students have proliferated at U.S. institutions of higher learning. One strategy employed by these programs is the learning community (LC), in which the same cohort of students takes several general education classes together. As general education courses at many institutions, Public Speaking and Human Communication are frequently included in LCs.

Learning communities are designed to hasten students' integration into college life by jump-starting the development of academic and social support networks that are considered critical to student retention (Astin, 1985; Shapiro & Levine, 1999). On many campuses, learning communities are also designed to help students see interdisciplinary connections between general education courses. Beyond these shared goals, learning communities may vary in their structure and format from campus to campus. Crookston’s (1974) early typology described four types of learning communities: 1)
content-centered communities that focus on a particular discipline; 2) environment-centered communities (often called “living-learning communities” today), that house LC students together in residence halls; 3) person-centered communities focused on personal growth and development rather than disciplinary subjects; and 4) group-centered learning communities emphasizing positive group interaction and democratic processes. Later, Smith, MacGregor, Matthews and Gabelnick (2004) categorized learning communities into three models based on the degree of interconnectivity between faculty members and course curriculum. The “within-course” LC links pre-existing courses, often large lecture classes, with no modifications to course curriculum. A small cohort of students within these classes takes the linked courses together, along with an additional course, frequently a first-year seminar course, where they are a self-contained group. In the “linked courses” model, students enroll in two or more courses with intentional modifications to the curriculum that highlight interdisciplinary connections. Unlike the “within course” model, the enrollment of these classes may be limited to those students in the learning community. In the “team-taught” LC, faculty members collaborate to develop and teach an interdisciplinary course with a shared syllabus.

Despite limited empirical research on the effectiveness of learning communities, as early as 1984, a National Institute of Education report urged that “every institution of higher education should strive to create learning communities, organized around specific intellectual themes or tasks” (p. 35). Twenty years later, the learning community model had been adopted at more
than 500 U.S. colleges and universities (Smith et al., 2004).

**Learning Community Research**

The pedagogical literature, based predominantly on case studies of individual institutions, generally concludes that learning communities produce modest gains in retention and academic achievement (see Swaner & Brownell, 2008; Taylor, Moore, MacGregor, & Lindblad, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004 for discussion), as well as a number of social outcomes, including identification and affiliation with the peer group and the institution, and feelings of acceptance by fellow students in the learning community (Astin, 1993; Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1993). Proponents claim that LC students are more actively engaged in the classroom (Tinto, Love, & Russo, 1993) and perceive a more supportive classroom environment (Dillon, 2003). Studies of community college students found those in learning communities were more likely to pass their courses (Bloom & Sommo, 2005; Tinto, 1997) and that LCs are particularly beneficial for at-risk students (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Belonging to a learning community may have disproportionate benefits for some groups. Hotchkiss, Moore, and Pitts (2006) found that participation in LCs increased the GPA of black males at a large university by more than a full letter grade, more than any other demographic group. Black females, followed by white males, also saw disproportionate benefits when compared to students who were not enrolled in learning communities. White females, however, gained no advan-
tage in terms of GPA. The authors hypothesize that white women “are more successful in forming informal communities among their peers” (p. 204) and because they already have these social networks, experience no additional benefits in terms of GPA or retention from the structure of the learning community. The vast majority of learning communities are designed for first-year students, or are cohort programs for students who are all at the same place in a lock-step curriculum, as is common in schools of law and medicine. We found no studies that compared the effectiveness of learning communities limited to first-year students to those that contained students who varied by class standing.

Important questions remain about the impact of learning communities on academic outcomes. Some suggest that LC’s effects are probably indirect, and more related to enhanced student engagement than to direct instruction or curricular linkages (Pike, 2000). Recent studies have found that GPA and retention benefits are short-term, declining over time (Hotchkiss et al., 2006; Scrivener, Bloom, LeBlanc, Paxson, Rouse, & Sommo, 2008), and that the major impact on students is in the affective domain—related to attitudes, self-concepts, and satisfaction with college, rather than in the cognitive domain of knowledge and skills mastery (Reynolds & Hebert, 1998).

Little research has explored the effects of learning community programs on faculty (Taylor et al., 2003), and reports are primarily anecdotal. Like students, faculty are generally positive about their learning community experiences. However, it should be noted that because nearly all of the extant literature is written by learning community proponents, it is likely to reflect the
views of faculty who have had success with learning community models. A theme that emerges in these faculty comments is that LCs change the teaching experience from one of isolation to one of collaboration (Price, 2005; Tinto, 1998). By connecting faculty, whom Tinto (1998) notes have often never collaborated outside of committees, faculty members are “energized” to improve student learning (Price, 2005, p. 17).

Albers’ (2007) survey research with a small sample of faculty members at Buffalo State College found that collaboration with other faculty and learning more about first-year students were the most frequently cited benefits of teaching in LCs. Frustrations with students over lack of academic preparedness and behavioral issues, as well as “the need to focus on my discipline rather than the theme of the learning community” were the greatest concerns (Albers, 2007, p. 22). Sociologist David Jaffee (2004, 2007), a learning community instructor and coordinator at the University of North Florida, is among a small number of faculty who have pointed out unintended negative consequences of learning communities. He argues that while the students’ homogeneity in terms of age and academic inexperience provides a “social glue” for the community, it also “can produce mutually reinforcing attitudes and behaviors more appropriate for high school than for college” (Jaffee, 2004, p. B16). These behaviors are problematic in the classroom and are frustrating for instructors. Jaffee (2004) reported:

Freshmen in a learning community have less opportunity to interact with older students, who tend to be more mature and often more academically serious. Thus, the communities designed to help students
through the transition to college life may inadvertently create conditions that potentially retard the students' academic development. (p. B16)

Additional challenges related to the internal dynamics of learning communities noted by faculty include an enhanced sense of group agency that can lead to an “us vs. them” mentality and conflict with instructors (Kussart, Hunt, & Simonds, 2004; Maher, 2004). Faculty also report problems with group-think (Jaffee, 2007; Maher, 2004; Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001) excessive socializing, and cliques or schisms in the group that undermine classroom climate (Jaffee, 2004, 2007). These faculty agree that specific training in classroom management techniques is needed to address the unique group dynamics of learning communities, particularly for new teaching assistants or for mature faculty used to a more hierarchical power relationship with students.

Research on the efficacy or appropriateness of LCs for particular disciplines or courses is scattered at best. Thus, while there is some data to indicate the overall impact of LCs, a critical gap in the literature is whether the LC is the most effective vehicle for teaching the distinct knowledge and competencies required by particular disciplines or majors.

COMMUNICATION COURSES IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The basic communication course is “an essential link” in many learning communities (Chesebro & Worley, 2000, p. 30) because it is interdisciplinary in nature
and often is a required general education course. This makes it a “convenient environment” for the introduction of new first-year student initiatives (Chesebro & Worley, 2000, p. 36). Worley and Worley (2006) note that oral communication courses are a natural fit for first-year experience programs, because they both emphasize fundamental academic skills such as listening, presenting, and small group interaction. Not surprisingly, content on communication skills is commonly found in textbooks used in first-year college seminar courses (Worley & Worley, 2006). Although the basic course may be intended to prepare first-year students for success in college courses, a national survey found that less than two percent of institutions report enrollment comprised of entirely first-year students (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). Morreale et al. suggest that students may be “better served enrolling in the basic course later in their academic careers in order to be well prepared for the working world” (pp. 420-421) or by taking an advanced oral communication course closer to graduation.

Few empirical studies have examined the impact of offering a public speaking course in a learning community. Edwards and Walker (2007) found that public speaking students in learning communities had lower communication apprehension scores than students who were not in learning communities. However, this study involved a relatively small number of students (n = 70) and employed the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24; Richmond & McCroskey, 1998), rather than the more reliable measure of public speaking anxiety, the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA; McCroskey, 1970). It did not go
beyond subscale means to explore differences between the two groups on specific items related to public speaking. An earlier conference paper (Gorcyca, Leonard, Cronk, & Olesen, 1997) compared PRCA scores of 44 learning community students to non-learning community students and found that learning communities made no difference in decline in speaking anxiety. The authors concluded that taking the basic course in any setting will have a beneficial effect on communication anxiety. A similarly small study (n = 44) found that learning community students enrolled in the basic communication course reported no greater emotional or task support from peers than students in traditional sections (Larson, 1998).

Two studies (Baker, Meyer & Hunt, 2005; Kussart, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007) focused on learning community students’ use of collective power to influence their instructors in the introductory communication course, many of whom were graduate teaching assistants. The studies offer contradictory results. Baker et al. (2005) found that learning community students were no more likely to use negative persuasive tactics than students in traditional sections. Kussart et al. (2007) found that the group cohesiveness created by learning communities increased LC students’ willingness to use persuasive strategies of both a positive and negative nature with their instructors. In some cases, TAs felt intimidated by learning community students who “ganged up” on them (Kussart et al., 2007, p. 93), and these experiences resulted in negative attitudes toward the learning community concept.

As the learning community movement continues to grow—and on some campuses is mandated as the
teaching delivery model—it is important for disciplines, including communication, to examine the impact of LCs on their particular student outcome objectives.

This study investigates the effectiveness of the learning community as a delivery model for the Public Speaking course. Unlike a history or math course, the emphasis on public performance in a public speaking course would appear to make it especially well-suited for the LC delivery model that offers social support, homogeneity (first-year students only), and audience familiarity. Specifically, we assess the impact of learning communities on student outcomes in terms of speaking anxiety levels, course grades, and student and instructor perceptions of their own experiences.

**SPEAKING ANXIETY**

Reduction of speaking anxiety is a goal of many introductory public speaking courses. Approximately half a million college students give classroom speeches each year (Pearson, Child, & Kahl, 2006). Students enter the public speaking course feeling greater trepidation about the course than other courses (Richmond & McCroskey, 1998). While most students will experience some degree of speaking anxiety, one in five will experience communication anxiety of a serious nature (McCroskey, 1982b). This student anxiety has a range of consequences, from poor performance in the class to withdrawal from the class to avoidance of future college classes and careers that require oral presentations.

The theoretical foundation for the study is based in the research examining audience effects on speaker
anxiety. In most people, speaking anxiety is considered to be a temporary state that is triggered by situational factors, including perceptions of the speaking environment and the audience that may fluctuate in intensity as a speech progresses. While more permanent trait anxiety and other causes of anxiety certainly exist, audience variables of familiarity to the speaker, pleasantness and status have received the greatest attention in empirical studies. A supportive classroom environment and a familiar, friendly audience have been consistently correlated with decreases in public speaking anxiety and increases in speaker confidence (Buss, 1980; Beatty, 1988; Harris, Sawyer, & Behnke, 2006; MacIntyre & MacDonald, 1998; McCroskey, 1984; Seta, Wang, Crisson, & Seta, 1989). In experimental research, students reported less anxiety and exhibited a willingness to speak longer when speaking to friends as opposed to strangers (MacIntyre & Thivierge, 1995). Unfamiliar audiences, including “virtual” audiences of realistically-animated characters, have been found to provoke speaking anxiety (Pertaub, Slater, & Barker, 2002). Particularly among highly anxious speakers, when an audience is perceived as congenial, levels of anxiety tend to decrease as a speech progresses (MacIntyre & McDonald, 1998). Conversely, Ayres (1986) found that if a speaker doubts she/he can meet the audience’s expectations, speaking anxiety will occur. Physiological studies have found that heart rate and other cardiovascular indicators of stress are higher in students who thought they were speaking to an audience of experts rather than peers (Hilmert, Christenfeld, & Kulik, 2002). Anecdotal observations from public speaking instructors suggest that anxiety-producing speaking expe-
Women consistently report more anxiety in public speaking contexts than males (Behnke & Sawyer, 2000; McCroskey, Simpson & Richmond, 1982; Vevea, Pearson, Child, & Semlak, 2009), although communication anxiety as a persistent trait is not significantly correlated with gender, age, or year in college (Dwyer & Fus, 1999). Although women report greater levels of fear in the public speaking classroom, they actually perform better than males and receive higher grades than males on classroom speeches (Pearson, 1985). Inexperience may also be related to contextual speaking anxiety. Rubin, Graham, and Mignerey (1990) found that college students became better communicators as they advanced toward graduation.

By contrast, there is little evidence to suggest situations in which an audience of friends may provoke more anxiety than an audience of strangers. Two studies have found that when an individual must perform a potentially embarrassing activity, a familiar audience of friends can actually elicit more anxiety than an audience of strangers (Brown & Garling, 1977; Froming, Corley, & Rinker, 1990). These findings have not been adequately explored in a public speaking context.

In summary, the literature from both the learning community and the public speaking fields suggests that the social benefits of learning communities could have a positive impact on public speaking student outcomes. This study compares students taking public speaking in learning communities with those in traditional, standalone sections to determine if in fact learning communi-

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ties offer a superior delivery model for the public speaking course. The following research questions were posed:

RQ1: Does taking public speaking in a learning community reduce speaking anxiety to a greater degree than taking public speaking in a traditional public speaking class?

RQ2: Does taking public speaking in a learning community rather than a traditional section have any impact on student grades?

RQ3: Do students perceive learning communities to provide a superior environment for the public speaking course compared to traditional sections?

RQ4: Do faculty perceive learning communities to provide a superior environment for the public speaking course compared to traditional sections?

METHOD

Setting

Located in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, Kennesaw State University enrolls approximately 22,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Enrollment in a learning community or in the first-year seminar course is required for all first-year students. In a typical fall semester, as many as 54 learning communities, serving 1350 students, are offered. Learning communities commonly include three general education courses, which are integrated with a theme that highlights interdisci-
plenary connections across courses. These LCs would be classified in the Smith et al. (2004) model noted previously as linked courses LCs. Public speaking has been offered in learning communities with themes ranging from leadership to career exploration to contemporary gender issues, as well as in learning communities for specific intended majors, such as pre-pharmacy and business.

Participants

Subjects (n = 236) were students enrolled in sections of the introductory Public Speaking course. Half of the students (n = 119) were enrolled in eight sections of public speaking offered in learning communities (LCs). These students took two to three courses together as a cohort, including public speaking. These students not only attended several classes together, often walking to class together, but also shared in common the fact that they were all first-year students, most of whom lived on campus in the same residential area. Because of these commonalities, the LC students would be expected to develop considerable familiarity with each other over the duration of the semester. The other half of the students (n = 117) were enrolled in eight stand-alone (SA) sections of public speaking. These sections included sophomores, juniors, and some seniors, as well as first-year students. Seven different faculty members taught the courses. All of the sections participating in the study were taught by full-time or part-time faculty, as opposed to graduate teaching assistants (who often teach introductory public speaking courses at large universities).
All sections were of equivalent size (maximum of 23 students), and used the same textbook.

In addition, interviews were conducted with three faculty members at the institution who had taught the course both as a stand-alone course and in the learning community format at least once. While additional faculty taught sections of public speaking whose students were included in the study, the interviews were limited to faculty other than the authors who had taught in both learning conditions and could compare their experiences.

**Procedures**

Four forms of inquiry were employed: the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA; McCroskey, 1970); an analysis of course grades, an attitudinal student survey, and qualitative interviews with instructors. The study used a matched pre-test/post-test design, a methodology associated with high internal validity (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). At the beginning of the semester, students in both learning conditions were given a highly-reliable (alpha reliability >.90), nationally-normed inventory of speaking anxiety, the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA; McCroskey, 1970) to establish a baseline speaking anxiety score. The PRPSA (see Appendix A) was chosen over the more broadly-focused Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) because it is a more reliable measure of speaking anxiety (McCroskey, 1982a). At the end of the same semester, students took the PRPSA again to determine whether their course experience had influenced their level of speaking anxiety, as reflected...
by changes in their PRPSA scores. Students also completed a brief survey at the end of the semester to provide more detail about their perceptions of the classroom climate and audience supportiveness in their public speaking class (see Appendix B). An analysis of student grades by learning condition, gender, and class standing was also conducted.

Finally, qualitative interviews with instructors were conducted to provide a more holistic view of the learning community environments. As noted previously, three of the seven faculty members who taught sections included in the study were selected for interviews, because these faculty members had experience teaching in both LC and SA environments. Interviews were conducted by the authors using the same list of seven questions for each faculty member. Questions related to perceived differences in the classroom environment, differences in performance level of the students, differences in teaching strategies in SA and LC sections, advantages and disadvantages to LCs for students and instructors, and preferences for either environment. Responses were recorded and analyzed for areas of consensus and of disagreement.

PRPSA, student survey, student demographic, and grade data were entered into SPSS for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to describe student responses and outcomes. To examine the effect of learning condition on pre-test PRPSA responses, a two-step procedure was used. First, because the PRPSA instrument employs multiple items per construct, a principal components factor analysis was used to reduce the number of variables from the 34-item PRPSA inventory into groupings of related factors. Multivariate analysis of
variance (MANOVA) was employed to assess the effect of learning condition on students’ speaking anxiety, grades and perceptions. Possible interaction effects of gender and class standing were also examined. These statistical procedures were performed to compare all students in LCs with all students in SAs. Additionally, the data was sorted to compare first-year students only. Equality of variance in significance testing was not assumed, because the two groups of students were not randomly assigned into test conditions, but rather self-selected a learning community or stand-alone section of public speaking through regular university registration procedures.

RESULTS

Demographic differences were found among students in learning communities (n = 119) and stand-alone sections (n = 117). SA sections contained a larger proportion of male students (37%) than LC sections (22%). SA sections also contained sophomores, juniors, and seniors; while LC sections were limited to first-year students (n = 119). Stand-alone sections enrolled a smaller proportion of freshmen (36.8%), and included sophomores (41.9%), juniors (18.8%), and seniors (2.6%).

The study posed the overall question, “Do learning communities offer a superior delivery model for the public speaking course?” The analysis that follows indicates that the answer is no. On the basis of reduction in speaking anxiety and student performance as reflected in grades, students in learning communities did not have superior outcomes to those in stand-alone sections.
Baseline Comparisons of Public Speaking Anxiety

A comparison of pre-test PRPSA scores revealed that students enrolled in learning communities entered the public speaking course with greater speaking anxiety than students enrolled in stand-alone sections, with an average PRPSA score of 113 (moderately high) vs. 101 (moderate). This difference was statistically significant \(t(234) = 4.157, p < .001\). The effect size of this difference is measured by a Cohen’s \(d\) value of .54. This is considered a medium effect; the mean PRPSA pre-test score in the LC group would be about at the same level as the 70th percentile score in the SA group.

A principal components factor analysis was used to reduce the number of variables. During the initial stage of this analysis, the Kaiser Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett’s test of sphericity were computed. The KMO measure obtained a value of .93. Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant \(\chi^2(561) = 4193, p < .001\). Both results provide evidence that the correlation matrix was amenable to factoring. In determining the number of factors to be extracted, scree plot analysis and interpretability of factors were considered. A four-factor solution accounted for 53.7% of the variance in the dataset. An equamax rotation was employed. The cutoff criterion between meaningful and trivial factor loadings was .40. Twenty-seven of the 34 variables had clearly high loadings on only one factor. Six of the variables resulted in moderate loadings on two factors. Only one variable, “I feel anxious while waiting to give a speech” failed to obtain a substantial loading on any of the four factors. This indicates that the factor analysis with its four-fac-
tor solution succeeded in achieving a simple structure to explain the data.

The four factors identified were interpreted as follows. The first factor was labeled **pre-speech anxiety**. This factor was associated with high loadings on items such as, “While preparing for giving a speech, I feel tense and nervous.” The second factor was labeled **performance anxiety during the speech**. It was associated with high loadings on items such as, “My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.” The third factor was labeled **physiological symptoms experienced during the speech**. It was associated with high loadings on items such as, “My hands tremble when I am giving a speech.” Finally, the fourth factor was labeled **imminent speech anxiety**. It was associated with high loadings on items dealing with feelings experienced just before the speech is to be given, such as, “I feel comfortable an hour before giving a speech.”

Variables were created for each of the four factors represented in the PRPSA. There were significant differences relating to the factors pre-speech anxiety \( t(234) = -2.514, p < .02 \) and imminent speech anxiety \( t(234) = -2.674, p < .001 \). Students in the LC sections of the course reported significantly higher anxiety during the preparation phase and just before the presentation of a speech than those in the SA sections. Differences in the other two factors were not significant.

**Post-test Results**

A repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to determine the effect of learning condition, gender and class standing on the dependent variables associated
with the first three research questions. These were the difference in PRPSA pre-test and post-test scores, course grade, and student perceptions as measured by five survey questions. MANOVA results indicate that learning condition significantly affects the combined dependent variable (Wilks’ $\lambda = .820$, $F(7, 220 ) = 6.884$, $p<.001$). This was the only main effect found to be significant. No interaction effects were significant. To identify the variables responsible for the significant MANOVA results for learning condition, univariate ANOVA was run as a post-hoc test. The ANOVA results reveal that only the responses on two student perception questions differ significantly by learning condition. These were the question of whether students considered their classmates friends ($F(1, 226) = 5.638$, $p<.05$) and the question of whether in hindsight the student would enroll in an LC or an SA public speaking course ($F(1, 226) = 41.691$, $p<.001$). Students enrolled in LC courses were found to be significantly more likely to consider their classmates friends and to say they would enroll in an LC course again. In short, the MANOVA and post-hoc ANOVA results indicate that learning condition does not create differential course outcomes related to speaking anxiety or grades for students in learning communities.

Research question one asked, “Does taking public speaking in a learning community reduce speaking anxiety to a greater degree than taking public speaking in a traditional public speaking class?” The data reveal that learning communities are no more effective at reducing speaking anxiety than traditional classroom formats. At the end of the semester, intra-group analysis of PRPSA post-test scores showed that students in both
learning conditions reduced their speaking anxiety by similar levels. The mean PRPSA score for students in learning communities dropped to 100.5 (moderate), a difference of more than 12 points, while the students in the stand-alone sections reduced their speaking anxiety by an average of 11 points, to 90 (moderately low). As noted previously, the MANOVA and post-hoc ANOVA analysis did not find this to be a significant difference.

**Gender and Class Standing**

Because stand-alone sections were populated by more males and more upperclassmen than learning communities, data analysis was used to determine whether gender and class standing could be confounding variables accounting for differences between students in learning communities and stand-alone sections. Males’ PRPSA scores showed higher baseline confidence at the outset of the course than females. Males’ average PRPSA pre-test score was 98 (moderate), vs. 111 (moderately high) for females. This difference was statistically significant ($p < .001$). By semester’s end, males’ post-test PRPSA score had dropped by 11 points, to 87 (moderately low), while females’ post-test scores dropped 12 points, to 99 (moderate). As previously stated, the MANOVA showed that gender made no difference in the degree of anxiety decline over the course of the semester. Another dependent variable in the MANOVA was course grade. Male students’ higher levels of speaking confidence did not translate into higher course grades. No significant difference was found between the average course grades of males and females.
Speaking anxiety going into the course was correlated with class standing. The ANOVA procedure revealed significant differences \( F(3, 232) = 3.627, p < .05 \) between the pre-test scores of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, with freshmen scoring the highest average PRPSA anxiety scores (\( M = 110 \)), followed by sophomores (\( M = 102 \)), juniors (\( M = 100 \)), and seniors (\( M = 82 \)). Post hoc analysis using Fisher’s LSD test showed that the only significant differences were between freshmen and the other three groups, with freshman showing the greatest anxiety.

All students reduced their anxiety levels by the end of the semester. Freshmen showed significant improvement between pre-test and post-test scores, dropping an average of 18 points on the PRPSA, from an average score of 110 to 92 (\( p < .001 \)). Sophomores significantly lowered their anxiety score from 102 to 88, a drop of 14 points (\( p < .001 \)). Juniors lowered their anxiety score from 100 to 93, a drop of 7 points that was not found to be statistically significant. The sample size of seniors was too small for meaningful analysis. However, as previously noted, the MANOVA showed no significant main or interaction effect involving class standing.

**First-Year Student Outcomes**

Because the baseline anxiety experienced by freshmen was found to differ significantly from other students’, data was sorted to compare first-year students in learning communities to first-year students in stand-alone sections. Of these students, 118 were female and 44 were male. One hundred nineteen first-year students took the course in learning communities, and 43 took it
in stand-alone sections. Among first-year students, those in learning communities had higher baseline anxiety scores ($M = 113$), compared to those in stand-alone sections ($M = 101$). One-way analysis of variance found this difference to be statistically significant [$F(1, 160) = 8.069, p < .005$]. By the end of the course, LC freshmen reduced their mean PRPSA score by 13 points, to 100. SA freshmen lowered their mean score to 90, a decline of 11 points. Both of these reductions were found to be significant ($p < .005$). A MANOVA was run using the difference in pre-test and post-test PRPSA scores for the first-year students as one of the dependent variables. There was no significant difference in the anxiety reductions made by the LC and SA groups.

An individual item analysis corroborates the above results. The ANOVA procedure showed significant differences in the pre-test responses between LC and SA freshmen on nine of 32 PRPSA items (PRPSA question numbers 2, 6, 8, 9, 12, 18, 27, 30, and 31). In all cases, learning community students reported more anxiety than stand-alone section students. These items were related to feelings of dread, fear, tenseness, nervousness, and difficulty sleeping when anticipating a speech. There were no significant differences between items related to anxiety during or after a speech.

On the post-test, ten items reflected significant differences between first-year student groups (PRPSA question numbers 2, 5, 12, 17, 18, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 31). For all items, the LC freshmen continued to report greater anxiety than SA freshmen. For most PRPSA items, both groups' anxiety showed a decline from the pre-test, but SA students' anxiety showed a slightly greater decline. For example, on the items that showed
significantly different responses on both the pre-test and post-test, LC students reduced their anxiety by an average of .3 points on a five-point scale. SA students reduced their anxiety by .4 points on a five-point scale. However, these differences in the degree of decline of anxiety were not statistically significant.

Course Grade Analysis

Research question two asked, “Does taking public speaking in a learning community rather than a traditional section have any impact on student grades? Learning communities do not appear to impact student grades. Although the average GPA of students in learning communities was slightly lower than students taking the course in a stand-alone section (3.05 for LC students vs. 3.10 for stand-alone section students), this difference was not statistically significant. Higher anxiety among LC freshmen did not translate to lower grades: Grades of LC freshmen were not statistically different from grades of SA freshmen, which averaged 3.0 in both learning conditions.

Student Perceptions of Learning Communities

Research question four asked, “Do students perceive learning communities to provide a superior environment for the public speaking course?” Responses to the attitudinal survey given at the end of the semester to supplement the PRPSA revealed that students perceived the learning community environment to be preferable to the stand-alone class. Pearson chi-square analysis found statistically significant differences $[\chi^2 (2) = 82.954, p <$
In response to the item, “In hindsight, if I had the ability to take Public Speaking over again, I would prefer to take Public Speaking in a) a learning community, b) a stand-alone course, or c) it would make no difference.” By a large margin, LC students preferred the learning community format (81%), and none said they would prefer a stand-alone section, although 19% said it made no difference. By comparison, just 14% of stand-alone section students said they preferred the stand-alone sections. Twenty-two percent said that if they could do it again, they would choose a learning community instead, while most students, 63%, said it made no difference.

LC students were more likely to consider fellow students in the class “friends” (LC: $M = 1.7$, $SD = .69$ vs. SA: $M = 2.1$, $SD = .93$). This difference was significant $[t(233) = -3.73, p < .001]$. An interesting finding, however, was that students in LCs were also more likely to indicate that the audience was a source of their anxiety (LC: $M = 3.2$, $SD = 1.30$ vs. SA: $M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.24$). This difference was also significant $[t(233) = -2.26, p < .05]$. There were no significant differences in students' perceptions of a supportive classroom environment or in students' ratings of their “overall comfort level at the end of the semester in presenting a speech to the students in my class.”

An analysis of the survey responses isolating only first-year students found similar results. Learning community freshmen were significantly more likely to prefer a learning community format if given the hypothetical opportunity to take the course again $[\chi^2(2) = 52.835, p < .001]$. In fact, 81% of LC freshmen preferred to take the course again in a learning community; zero
said they would prefer to take it as a stand-alone section, and the rest indicated it made no difference to them. By contrast, 21% of stand-alone freshmen said they would prefer to take the course in a learning community, 12% preferred a stand-alone section, and the largest portion, 65%, said it made no difference.

LC freshmen were also more likely than SA freshmen to consider fellow students in the class “friends” (LC: $M = 1.7$, $SD = .69$ vs. SA: $M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.01$). This difference was significant [$t(159) = -2.36$, $p < .05$]. There were no significant differences between first-year student groups on other survey items.

**Faculty Perceptions of Learning Community Efficacy**

Research question four asked, “Do faculty perceive learning communities to provide a superior environment for the public speaking course compared to traditional sections?” Interviews with a small group of faculty members experienced in teaching the public speaking course in both LC and SA conditions offer anecdotal insights into faculty viewpoints. While not generalizable, these results contribute to a more holistic picture of the LC experience. The instructors provided no consistent agreement as to whether the LC condition reduced observed speaking anxiety or enhanced speaking performance. All of the instructors perceived that the classroom environment was more cohesive in LCs than in SAs, noting that students seemed to bond more quickly, talk with each other before and after class about non-class related topics, and exhibit a high level of supportiveness for each other in the act of public speaking. This was
viewed as a strength of LCs. One instructor felt he facilitated “community” by using the first five minutes of class time to “check in” with LC students to see what was on their minds, that may or may not be related to the public speaking course.

Consistent with the literature previously reported, two instructors noted that a downside to peer familiarity is “13th grade behaviors” that weren’t observed in SA sections and can lead to classroom behavior management issues. “I have to ‘teach’ the LC students how to be respectful audience members if they are acting less mature than other students,” noted a faculty member, who sends e-mails to disruptive students.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the faculty members reported they do not typically alter content and instruction style in either condition, with the exception of some prep work to vary lecture examples and speech topics to support the LC theme and encourage interdisciplinary connections. Faculty members noted that they may have to exert more effort to coordinate with linked instructors. On the positive side, one faculty member noted that the LC allows for creativity and collegiality with instructors outside one’s own discipline. On the negative side, faculty also noted that cross-disciplinary collaborations were difficult to cultivate when LC instructors from other disciplines failed to interact with their linked colleagues. As is apparent in this situation, several times in interviews we noted that faculty members used phrases that suggest they recognize a discrepancy between “ideal” LC practices and “actual” instructional practices. For example, one noted, “If we do it right” (emphasis added) “the LC shows students how to think across disciplines.” Similarly, we heard, “If it is done
right,” (emphasis added) “there shouldn’t be a difference in instruction except a deliberate connection to the other courses.” The onus for ensuring that learning communities are “done right” is largely left to individual faculty members, who may not have the control, where faculty peers are concerned, or knowledge of best practices to ensure that the learning community lives up to its potential. Only one faculty member had a clear preference for teaching in LCs or SAs, and preferred SAs because they were “less work—I don’t have to coordinate with others.” Other instructors were amenable to teaching in either learning condition.

**DISCUSSION**

This study fills a critical gap in the literature about the impact of learning communities on the communication discipline, and adds insight to our knowledge of pedagogical approaches to reducing speaking anxiety. It finds that the learning community model does not appear to offer significant advantages in terms of course outcomes for public speaking students. Rather, it suggests that first-year learning communities attract students with greater speaking anxiety, and put them in a classroom environment where they do not have exposure to more mature and confident classmates. In addition, the study challenges commonly held assumptions about speaking anxiety and audience familiarity and friendliness. It confirms that taking public speaking in a learning community does not reduce speaking anxiety any more than taking public speaking in a traditional classroom, and has no impact on student grades.
Rather, enrollment in a learning community is associated with higher average PRPSA anxiety scores both going into the course and coming out of the course. Although more students in learning communities considered their classmates to be friends than students in stand-alone sections did, this did not reduce LC students’ speaking anxiety or create a perception of a more supportive speaking environment than that experienced by SA students. While faculty perceived more peer support in their LC classes, none of them observed noticeable differences in student anxiety or course outcomes.

The findings contradict previous research that correlates audience familiarity and friendliness with reduced speaking anxiety, suggesting a limit to this relationship. As Brown & Garling (1977) and Froming et al. (1990) have noted, making mistakes in front of friends or respected peers can be more anxiety-producing than embarrassing oneself in front of strangers or mere acquaintances. This phenomenon is well known by every college professor who has felt more anxiety presenting scholarship in front of colleagues from his or her own institutions than to unknown conference participants. MacIntyre & Thivierge (1995) explained the following:

... friends may tease the speaker immediately following a speech, are better able to associate the present with a past faux pas and in the future can remind the speaker of an embarrassing action. If performing a speaking task clashes with the wish to maintain a positive image with one’s friends, then anxiety seems likely to arise. (p. 454)

An interesting finding of this study is that student perceptions of learning communities were quite divergent from the reality of actual student outcomes.
Whether students had taken public speaking in a learning community or in a stand-alone section, they perceived learning communities to be the superior environment for the public speaking course. This phenomenon was reflected in a “brand loyalty” among learning community students. Despite higher levels of speaking anxiety, LC students expressed a greater degree of comfort in the learning community structure. More than 80% of learning community students said that they would choose a learning community again for their public speaking course. Only 14% of stand-alone students said they would choose a stand-alone section, with 22% saying they would prefer to take the course in a learning community. This preference may be based on fear of the unknown—LC students may assume that instructors of stand-alone sections do not take steps to create a supportive classroom environment, when in fact, many of them make great efforts to do so.

Gender and class standing may be better predictors of speaking anxiety than classroom environment. Male students’ PRPSA scores reflected greater confidence going into the course, and showed greater declines in speaking anxiety than females by the end of the course. This is consistent with previous research that has shown that women report more speaking anxiety than males (Behnke & Sawyer, 2000). We note that at 18 or 19 years old, girls may be particularly self-conscious about displaying gender-appropriate ideals of appearance and “feminine” behavior, which may contribute to their anxiety when presenting in front of peers.

The study provides evidence of an inverse relationship between class standing and speaking anxiety. PRPSA scores reveal that the higher the student’s class,
the lower the speaking anxiety. This finding is consistent with previous scholarship that found that college students became better communicators as they advanced toward graduation (Rubin et al., 1990). First-year students, many without any significant speaking experience, would be expected to report speaking anxiety. These findings lead us to question the wisdom of isolating freshmen together in learning communities. First-year students in stand-alone sections may benefit from exposure to more confident upperclassmen and model their performance after these students. They may also gain confidence from seeing that they can “hold their own” with older students in an environment that is not “13th grade.”

The significant differences between first-year groups also suggest that there may be something about the type of student who chooses a learning community that is correlated with higher speaking anxiety. Learning community students came into the course with a significantly higher level of anxiety, which although reduced by the end of the term, was still slightly higher than that of students who chose stand-alone sections. This was true even when first-year students were isolated for analysis. Thus the differences are not simply explainable by the first-year status of all LC students. The learning community model may attract students who lack confidence, and consciously or subconsciously seek more social support. This is consistent with previous scholarship that found that less-prepared students and those who feel alienated by a large campus are more likely to be attracted to the LC model (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006). The higher speaking anxiety of LC students may be an artifact associated with self-se-
lection, rather than a treatment effect of the LC classroom condition.

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of real-world classroom studies is that students are not randomly assigned to treatment conditions as they would be in a classic experimental design, but rather choose the LC or SA condition of their own volition through the regular registration process. Thus, while this study identifies statistically significant associations between learning condition and student outcomes, causation cannot be assumed. Instructor effects could not be isolated because not every instructor could be assigned to both learning conditions. In addition, statistical significance of differences in grades based on class standing could not be determined because small cell sizes resulting from very few Ds and Fs and few upperclassmen would not allow these to be included as factors in the model.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research might establish a psychological and academic profile of students who choose learning community formats over stand-alone sections, and confirm whether lack of confidence in speaking or other academic abilities is a trait of these students. While the present study found no difference in course outcomes for a general student population, further research is needed to determine if LCs might be particularly beneficial for
academically at-risk students or highly anxious students taking public speaking. The current findings also point to the need for more research on audience effects and speaking anxiety, to identify classroom conditions in which familiar audiences of peers actually increase, rather than decrease speaking anxiety.

Future scholarship might also consider the construct of affective learning, which focuses on the development of positive attitudes toward the subject or the teacher (Bloom, 1956). Measurements of affective learning might encompass, for example, the value that students place on learning public speaking skills, how important they believe the public speaking class is in the college curriculum, or how important they believe communication skills will be in their future careers. Affective learning is thought to facilitate cognitive learning and motivation (Rodriguez, Plax & Kearney, 1996). The Affective Learning Scale (Andersen, 1979) and its subscales related to attitude toward course content and course instructor might yield more information about the interplay between the affective and cognitive domains in the learning community format. Because affective learning is correlated with motivation to learn and to use what is learned after the student leaves the classroom (Chory & McCroskey, 1999), demonstrating a connection between learning communities and affective learning would add an important dimension to our knowledge of the benefits of learning communities.

Finally, the interview results presented here and the limited empirical literature on faculty perspectives suggest the need for more robust studies of faculty experience in teaching in learning communities, and studies
that include a large sample size of faculty randomly selected from those who have and have not taught in LCs.

Implications for Communication Educators

For communication department chairs operating in an era of limited resources, “Knowing more about the true impact of programs like [learning communities] allows college administrators to make more informed decisions regarding the amount of resources to devote to them” (Hotchkiss et al., 2006, p. 207). This study suggests that communication departments should proceed cautiously with the learning community pedagogy. While the freshman learning community may benefit the institution as a whole with modest gains in retention, it does not appear to offer measurable advantages to public speaking students. On the contrary, it may isolate students with the weakest public speaking confidence levels and provide no opportunities for exposure to upperclassmen who can model appropriate college-level performance standards and classroom behavior.

College administrators and basic course coordinators should also weigh the role of instructor training in their decision-making. Is specific training available or required for faculty who teach in LCs that goes beyond content-based curriculum to emphasize the challenges and opportunities presented by the cohesive group dynamics of learning communities? Does such training encompass the teaching styles best suited to the power dynamics of LCs, or classroom management strategies? Do existing new faculty orientation or graduate teaching assistant training programs currently address the unique qualities of learning communities? Are there
structural mechanisms in place to ensure that collaboration between faculty members is sustained throughout the semester, or to address problems that may emerge? Clearly, faculty assigned to teach in LCs should be made aware of the population factors that influence the LC environment. Instructors may have to intensify their efforts to set a tone of enthusiasm, warmth, and rapport with students, while setting particularly clear expectations for college-level performance and behavior. Public speaking instructors, in particular, should also anticipate that the high audience familiarity of learning communities may potentially lead to greater fear of embarrassment, exacerbating speaking anxiety. Basic course instructors who are experienced in teaching in learning communities can offer much to further the dialogue about learning community pedagogy and best practices.

Finally, do the benefits of association with a campus-wide learning community program outweigh the limited impact that the LC structure may have on basic communication course students? Chesebro & Worley (2000) note that there are positive and negative consequences to participation in learning community programs. The communication department may benefit if it is associated with positive first-year student outcomes, positioning it as central to the goals of the institution and worthy of continued support. However, it may also be perceived by other disciplines or learning community organizers as a “content-free” skills course, or as a “service” course rather than a serious academic discipline (Chesebro & Worley, 2000, p. 31).

Tinto and Goodsell-Love (1993) caution, “Many see [the learning community] as a cure-all for a host of
problems ranging from poor student involvement in learning to low rates of student persistence. But like many new trends, proponents’ claims about the effectiveness of collaborative learning tend to run ahead of empirical evidence of program impact” (p. 16). Assuming that academic departments are given a choice by their institutions, the empirical evidence shows no reason for communication departments to rush to jump on the learning community bandwagon, and in fact, offers arguments for resisting this model for the public speaking class.

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APPENDIX A

PERSONAL REPORT OF PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY (PRPSA)

Instructions: Below are 34 statements that people sometimes make about themselves. Please indicate whether or not you believe each statement applies to you by marking whether you:

<p>| | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Strongly Agree</td>
<td>(2) Agree</td>
<td>(3) undecided</td>
<td>(4) Disagree</td>
<td>(5) Strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. While preparing to give a speech, I feel tense and nervous.
2. I feel tense when I see the words speech and public speaking on a course outline.
3. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.
4. Right after giving a speech, I feel that I have had a pleasant experience.
5. I get anxious when I think about an upcoming speech.
6. I have no fear of giving a speech.
7. Although I am nervous just before giving a speech, I soon settle down after starting and feel calm and comfortable.
8. I look forward to giving a speech.
9. When the instructor announces a speaking assignment in class, I can feel myself getting tense.
10. My hands tremble when I am giving a speech.
11. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.
12. I enjoy preparing for a speech.
Public Speaking Courses in Learning Communities

13. I am in constant fear of forgetting what I prepared to say.
14. I get anxious if someone asks me something about my topic that I do not know.
15. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.
16. I feel that I am in complete possession of myself while giving a speech.
17. My mind is clear while giving a speech.
18. I do not dread giving a speech.
19. I perspire just before starting a speech.
20. My heart beats very fast just as I start a speech.
21. I experience considerable anxiety while sitting in the room just before my speech starts.
22. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while I'm giving a speech.
23. Realizing that only a little time remains in a speech makes me very tense and anxious.
24. While giving a speech, I can control my feelings of tension and stress.
25. I breathe faster just before starting a speech.
26. I feel comfortable and relaxed in the hour or so just before giving a speech.
27. I do poorly giving speeches because I am anxious.
28. I feel anxious when the teacher announces the date of a speaking assignment.
29. When I make a mistake while giving a speech, I find it hard to concentrate on the parts that follow.
30. During an important speech, I experience a feeling of helplessness building up inside me.
31. I have trouble falling asleep the night before a speech.
32. My heart beats very fast while I'm presenting a speech.
33. I feel anxious while waiting to give my speech.
While giving a speech, I get so nervous that I forget facts I know.

To determine your score on the PRPSA, complete the following steps:

1. Add the scores for items 1-3, 5, 9, 10, 13, 14, 19-23, 25, 27-34.
2. Add the scores for items 4, 6-8, 11, 12, 15-18, 24, and 26.
3. Complete the following formula:

   \[ \text{PRPSA} = 132 - (\text{total from step 1}) + (\text{total from step 2}) \]

Your score should range between 34 and 170. If your score is below 34 or above 170, you have made a mistake in computing it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Anxiety about Public Speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34-84</td>
<td>Low (5% of people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85-92</td>
<td>Moderately low (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93-110</td>
<td>Moderate (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111-119</td>
<td>Moderately high (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120-170</td>
<td>Very high (40%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most people score in the moderate to high categories.

Note: Complete one of these forms at the beginning of the semester and one after your final speech. Compare your total scores as well as your responses to individual items.

APPENDIX B

END-OF-COURSE SURVEY

Please rate your level of agreement with each of the following statements.

1. The audience in this class was a source of anxiety when I presented a speech.
   a. strongly agree
   b. somewhat agree
   c. neutral
   d. somewhat disagree
   e. strongly disagree

2. I would consider my fellow students in this class “friends.”
   a. strongly agree
   b. somewhat agree
   c. neutral
   d. somewhat disagree
   e. strongly disagree

3. The audience in this class provided a supportive environment for learning to speak in public.
   a. strongly agree
   b. somewhat agree
   c. neutral
   d. somewhat disagree
   e. strongly disagree

4. On a scale of 1-5, I would rate my overall comfort level at the end of the semester in presenting a speech to the students in my class as:
   a. 5: extremely comfortable presenting to these class members
   b. 4: very comfortable presenting to these class members

BASIC COMMUNICATION COURSE ANNUAL

http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol23/iss1/17
c. 3: moderately comfortable presenting to these class members

d. 2: not very comfortable presenting to these class members

e. 1: extremely uncomfortable presenting to these class members

5. In hindsight, if I had the ability to take Public Speaking over again, I would prefer to:

a. take Public Speaking in a learning community (with students I attend several classes with as a group)

b. take Public Speaking as a stand-alone course, not in a learning community

c. It would make no difference to me.

Thank you for your participation!
The Effects of Using Peer Workshops on Speech Quality, Public Speaking Anxiety, and Classroom Climate

Melissa A. Broeckelman-Post
B. Scott Titsworth
LeAnn M. Brazeal

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 students 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 for each student).
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, \(\lambda = .144, F(1, 156) = 26.248, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .144\), and for speech grades by group, \(\lambda = .887, F(2, 156) = 9.922, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .113\). Tests of within-subjects effects were significant for speech grades, \(F(1, 156) = 26.248, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .144\), and for speech grades by group, \(F(2, 156) = 9.922, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .113\). Within subjects contrasts for speech grades showed significant linear trends, \(F(1, 156) = 26.248, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .144\), 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
Peer Workshops

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

**Means and standard deviations**

for speech grades by group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</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, $\lambda = .861$, $F(2, 155) = 12.469, p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .139$, $\eta^2 = .139$. 
and for PSA by group, $\lambda = .925$, $F(4, 310) = 3.100$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .038$. 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, $F(2, 312) = 13.766$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .081$, and for PSA by group, $F(4, 312) = 3.254$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$. 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
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 re-
markably 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 re-
ported 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 in-
consistent. From the pre-test to just after speech 1, stu-
dents’ 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 conclu-
sion from the data is that the workshop approach at Ap-
palachian 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 stu-
dents 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 stu-
dents who did not, these findings suggest a different
and more complex relationship. The Appalachian Uni-
versity 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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Students’ Communication Predispositions: An Examination of Classroom Connectedness in Public Speaking Courses

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INTRODUCTION

Sweaty palms, “butterflies” in the stomach, or a “lump” in the throat are a few common pre-public speaking phenomena that plague many college students enrolled in basic public speaking courses (McCullough, Russell, Behnke, Sawyer, & Witt, 2006; Winters, Horvath, Moss, Yarhouse, Sawyer, & Behnke, 2006), with many students likely to experience their highest level of public speaking anxiety or apprehension right before giving a speech (Behnke & Sawyer, 1999). Public speaking is one part of communication apprehension (CA), which is defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). Public speaking is a common experience for college students, the course is either mandatory or recommended at most colleges and universities in the United States (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006; Pearson, DeWitt, Child, Kahl, & Dandamudi, 2007). Examining factors that alleviate public speaking anxiety is warranted, given many students report feeling anxiety before giving speeches (Ablamowicz, 2005), and are often required to enroll in presentation-based courses.
In general, helping students to achieve academic success is difficult (Hunter, 2006), especially for public speaking instructors who strive to help students cope with public speaking anxiety and apprehension. Student performance should be considered the most important outcome of the classroom experience (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002; Page & Mukherjee, 2000), and much of instructional communication research has focused on effective instructor communicative attributes and how they enhance the classroom experience, including teacher caring (Teven & McCroskey, 1997), self-disclosure (Cayanus, Martin & Goodboy, 2009), and immediacy (Witt, Wheeless & Allen, 2004). Most often, research examines the classroom climate in terms of the student-teacher interactions in the classroom (Johnson, 2009), and Dwyer, Bingham, Carlson, Prisbell, Cruz, and Fus, (2004) noted little, if any, research has examined supportive classroom climate based on perceptions of student-to-student communicative attributes. Thus, the aim of the present study is to determine if student-to-student connectedness helps to reduce public speaking anxiety and apprehension as well as increase self-perceived communication competence for students enrolled in basic public speaking courses.

Prior research indicates intervention strategies help students in public speaking courses. For example, Ayres, Schliesman, and Ayres Sonandré (1998) found that in-class practice was an effective way to reduce public speaking anxiety for students, and Menzel and Carrell (1994) found more preparation time leads to better speech performance. Likewise, students enrolled in public speaking courses who rehearsed their speeches in front of an audience prior to the actual presentation are
likely to receive higher evaluation scores than those who did not (Smith & Frymier, 2006). Student-to-student connectedness in the classroom may also offer an opportunity for students to feel more comfortable giving speeches.

**Classroom Connectedness**

Classroom connectedness is defined “as student-to-student perceptions of a supportive and cooperative communication environment in the classroom” (Dwyer, et al., 2004, p. 267). The classroom environment can be viewed as a community setting. Teaching and learning not only occurs between the teacher and student but also among students (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002). For example, Kendrick and Darling (1990) reported students will ask other students in the classroom clarifying questions to better understand course material. Moreover, prior research found positive associations between student-to-student connectedness and affective learning (Johnson, 2009), cognitive learning (Prisbell, Dwyer, Carlson, Bingham, & Cruz, 2009), and self-regulated learning (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010).

Palmer (1993) stated knowing and learning are part of a communal, collaborative process shared among instructors and students. Moreover, Hirschy and Wilson (2002) argued that as teachers and students spend several weeks to several months together in one setting, they develop relationships over time through continuous interactions and common goals. Even though instructor behaviors and teaching methods profoundly influence the classroom experience, students are part of the classroom community and take part in the responsibility for
class interactions. Peer interactions significantly influence the classroom climate (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Fassinger (1997) examined participation as a group experience and found students’ perceptions of peer friendliness influenced how often they were willing to speak in class, whereas perceptions of the instructor had less impact on student participation. Fassinger (1995) also found level of student supportiveness predicted either classroom participation or classroom silence. Similarly, student misbehaviors erode student-to-student connectedness in college classrooms (Bingham, Carlson, Dwyer, & Prisbell, 2009).

Presence of peers differs from the perception of supportive peers. For example, when students believed they were the center of attention, they reported they were less likely to participate in the classroom (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004). Moreover, students in large classes reported a lack of involvement, lack of individualized attention from instructor, and an inhibition of student-instructor communication (Smith, Kopfman, & Ahyun, 1996). Similarly, Kendrick and Darling (1990) found an inverse relationship between class size and student clarifying tactics (e.g., question-asking). In larger class sizes, clarifying tactics decreased. Neer and Kircher (1989) found classroom participation and discussion were mediated by interpersonal familiarity and acceptance. Students were more comfortable communicating in small groups rather than with the entire class. Thus, establishing relationships with other students acts as a precursor to student involvement (Sideling & Booth-Butterfield, 2010). If students develop a sense of connectedness with the peers in basic public speaking
courses, they may in turn experience a reduction in public speaking anxiety and communication apprehension.

Public Speaking Anxiety/Communication Apprehension

Public speaking anxiety is a common experience (Daly, Vangelisti, & Weber, 1995) that is associated with psychological anxiety and physiological stress indicators (Witt, Brown, Roberts, Weisel, Sawyer, & Behnke, 2006). Public speakers are likely to experience heart rate elevations, excessive sweating, trembling, and gastrointestinal sensations (Behnke & Carlile, 1971; Horvath, Hunter, Weisel, Sawyer, & Behnke, 2004; Witt et al., 1995). Thus, the overall experience is likely to have debilitating effects on individuals’ speaking performances (Daly et al., 1995). Students typically experience the most anxiety immediately prior to the public speaking experience and that this anxiety is further intensified when students also believed they lack the ability to accomplish the speaking assignment (Luchetti, Phipps, & Behnke, 2003). Even well before the speech performance, level of anxiety influences motivation to prepare for the presentation (Mitchell & Nelson, 2007).

Students who have a negative attitude toward their presentations are less motivated to prepare and present their speeches. Students high in communication apprehension (CA) spend more time preparing their speeches than their low CA counterparts (Ayres, 1996). However, they ineffectively spend time preparing notes rather than focus more time on audience analysis. Anxiety may motivate high CA students to prepare for their public
speaking assignments but it also influences how they prepare. Ayres noted high CA students in public speaking courses seem to avoid communication-oriented preparation. Thus, it is important to examine other strategies that can alleviate public speaking anxiety, especially for high CA students.

Edwards and Walker (2007) found that students who participated in learning communities experienced a reduction in communication apprehension. The researchers noted this outcome may be due to the notion that learning communities provide students with increased opportunities for communication between students and faculty. Overall, Tinto (1993) offered a very broad definition for a learning community: shared knowledge and shared knowing. Booth-Butterfield (1988) found that students’ communication anxiety and avoidance may also decrease when instructors provide students with activities in a variety of contexts. This may relate to Neer and Kircher’s (1989) findings that students are more comfortable communicating in small groups rather than with the entire class. Ultimately, students who experience a reduction in their communication apprehension are also likely to experience an increase in their self-perceived communication competence.

Communication Competence

McCroskey and McCroskey (1988) stated that individuals’ willingness to communicate with others is strongly rooted in their self-perceived communication competence. Spitzberg (1983) conceptualized communication competence to include knowledge, skill, and motivation, and can be considered an interpersonal im-
pression, judged on a continuum of effectiveness and appropriateness. Jensen and Jensen (2006) stated communication competence is a learned behavior and individuals need to adapt their communication to various contexts in order to be competent communicators. Almeida (2004) examined students’ perceptions of communication competence and found that they viewed communication competence as a performance that is strongly associated with social bondedness. Moreover, self-perceived communication competence is inversely associated with communication apprehension and introversion, while positively related to self-esteem and sociability (Richmond, McCroskey, & McCroskey, 1989). Thus, students who suffer from severe communication apprehension also are going to perceive themselves as incompetent communicators. This is especially noteworthy, because Dwyer and Fus (2002), and Rubin, Rubin, and Jordan (1997) found that many students are likely to experience a reduction in communication apprehension and an increase in self-perceived communication competence over time in basic public speaking courses.

Effective teaching strategies in public speaking courses help to alleviate anxiety for students and may enhance their communication skills. Dwyer and Fus (2002) examined instruction in public speaking courses and their results indicated instructors’ learning strategies and interventions help to reduce CA and enhance perceptions of communication competence. Essentially, if communication competence can improve through trial and error (Jensen & Jensen (2006), students who have more opportunities to interact with peers in class will also have more opportunities to improve upon their communication skills. Hence, it is possible to help stu-
dents increase their perceptions of communication competence in public speaking courses over the course of a traditional 16-week semester.

**RATIONALE**

If students experience a sense of connectedness with their peers it may alleviate some of their public speaking anxiety and apprehension. McPherson, Kearney, and Plax (2003) stated that “teachers and students can and do become more familiar with each other over time” (p. 80). Thus, as the semester progresses, students have the opportunity to interact with each other and become more familiar with one another over time. Ultimately, public speaking instructors need to consider if student-to-student connectedness can reduce students’ level of public speaking anxiety and apprehension as well as increase students’ self-perceived communication competence.

Overall, public speaking anxiety may be influenced by a variety of factors such as lack of preparation or prior experiences (Pearson et al., 2007). However, fear of negative evaluation is a primary cause of public speaking anxiety. There is greater likelihood for speakers to experience state anxiety during public speaking episodes when they experience a greater fear of negative evaluation (Woody & Rodriguez, 2000). Interestingly, students report their anxiety may be communicated to their audience (Woody & Rodriguez, 2000), however, Behnke, Sawyer, and King (1987) found the audience is not likely to pick up on the student speaker’s anxiety. While listening to a student speaker, the other students...
in class are not likely to notice the speaker's anxiety signals such as a quivering voice or trembling hands. If students in public speaking courses realize their audience is not very critical of their speaking performances they may, in turn, become more comfortable during their presentations. Similarly, Behnke and Sawyer (2004) noted students often report increases in confidence with repeated exposure to audiences, and Kondo (1999) found individuals with initial lower public speaking anxiety are more likely to engage in effective anxiety reducing strategies such as audience depreciation (e.g., thinking of the audience as vegetables). Perceptions of the audience and audience feedback play a pivotal role in public speaking anxiety (MacIntyre & MacDonald, 1998). Thus, it is beneficial for students in basic public speaking courses to perceive a sense of connectedness with their peers. Student-to-student connectedness in public speaking courses may provide students with a safe haven that serves to alleviate public speaking anxiety and apprehension. Moreover, given prior research indicated students perceive communication competence, in part, as a performance and social bondedness, students should perceive an increase in their communication competence over the course of a semester in classes that they also perceive student-to-student connectedness. Therefore, data collection took place at two points in the semester, the first data collection (T1) occurred during the first week of a 16-week semester and the second data collection (T2) took place during the 15th week. The following hypotheses are offered:

H1a: There will be a positive association between student-to-student connectedness and the
change in students’ perceptions of their public speaking anxiety from \( T^1 \) to \( T^2 \).

**H1b:** There will be a positive association between student-to-student connectedness and the change in students’ perceptions of their public speaking apprehension from \( T^1 \) to \( T^2 \).

**H2:** There will be a positive association between student-to-student connectedness and the change in students’ perceptions of their communication competence from \( T^1 \) to \( T^2 \).

**H3a:** Student-to-student connectedness will mediate the association between \( T^1 \) public speaking anxiety and \( T^2 \) communication competence.

**H3b:** Student-to-student connectedness will mediate the association between \( T^1 \) public speaking apprehension and \( T^2 \) communication competence.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

A total of 368 undergraduate students (\( n = 203 \) females, \( n = 165 \) males) enrolled in introductory public speaking courses at a mid-size, public university voluntarily participated in this IRB approved study. Surveys were administered over two data waves during the semester. At the start of the semester (first week, Time 1), students completed self-reports of self-perceived communication competence, public speaking anxiety, and
the PRCA-24 public speaking apprehension subscale. Instructors’ sex along with students’ demographic information (i.e., age, sex, and academic rank) were also collected during the first data wave. Students were from across academic ranks (n = 141 freshmen, n = 104 sophomores, n = 83 juniors, n = 37 seniors), their mean age was 19.31 (SD = 2.58), and 235 students reported on courses with female instructors and 129 students reported on courses with male instructors.

The second data wave (Time 2) took place at the end of the semester (15th week) when students completed assigned speeches. Students completed the same measures again with the addition of Connected Classroom Climate Inventory. Given the number of speech assignments may vary across basic public speaking courses at the university, students also reported the number of speeches (M = 3.87, SD = 1.16) that they presented. In order to ensure Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2) surveys were matched together, students were assigned code numbers for each public speaking course and asked to seal completed surveys in envelopes. Both data waves took place during normal class time and students received minimal course credit for their participation. Only participants who completed both surveys were included in this study.

Measures

Communication competence. The 12-item Self-Perceived Communication Competence scale measures the way individuals view their own communication competence (Chesebro et al., 1992). The items reflect generalized communication contexts: public speaking, large
meeting, small group, and dyadic (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1988). Responses were solicited from 0 = completely incompetent to 100 = completely competent. Richmond et al. (1989) reported coefficient alphas of .93 and .96 across two studies. For this study, \( \alpha = .82 (M = 79.71, SD = 12.88) \) for T1, and \( \alpha = .85 (M = 84.27, SD = 11.16) \) for T2.

Public speaking anxiety. Daly, Vangelisti, Neel, and Cavanaugh’s (1989) 10-item public speaking anxiety measure addresses individuals’ fear or anxiety associated with public speaking (e.g., “I have no fear of giving a speech”). Responses were solicited using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Daly et al. reported a coefficient alpha of .89 for the measure. For this study, \( \alpha = .90 (M = 31.72, SD = 8.15) \) for T1, and \( \alpha = .88 (M = 28.48, SD = 7.38) \) for T2.

Public speaking apprehension. The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) represents communication apprehension across four generalized contexts: interpersonal, small group, large meeting, and public speaking. For this study, the 6-item PRCA-24 public speaking subscale was used to address individuals’ level of communication apprehension in their public speaking courses. Vinson and Roberts (1993) stated it is appropriate to separate PRCA-24 items into subscales in order to appropriately identify individuals’ type of communication apprehension. They noted two individuals can have the same PRCA-24 score but for very different types of communication apprehension, and found the PRCA-24 public speaking subscale reliable across studies, with a range of .79 to .92. For this study, \( \alpha = .86 (M = 18.87, SD = 5.19) \) for T1, and \( \alpha = .83 (M = 17.01, SD = 4.73) \) for T2.
Classroom connectedness. The 18-item, Likert-type, Connected Classroom Climate Inventory (CCCI) represents student-to-student behaviors that contribute to perceptions of a supportive climate in an instructional setting (Dwyer et al., 2004). Based on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) students were asked to report their perceptions of student-to-student connectedness in their introductory public speaking courses. For the original study, the measure yielded a coefficient alpha of .94. For this study, $\alpha = .95$ ($M = 74.02, SD = 10.96$).

Data Analyses

This study used discrepancy scores for hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H2. Discrepancy scores are based on procedures that reflect the changing nature of behaviors, attitudes, or perceptions. In this case discrepancy scores were used to determine if public speaking anxiety and apprehension, and communication competence discrepancy scores had any associations with perceptions of student-to-student connectedness.

We also employed path analyses for H3a and H3b to test the mediating effects of student-to-student connectedness on students’ public speaking apprehension, speech anxiety, and communication competence. A path analysis is an extension of the regression model, and offers a path model relating independent, intermediary, and dependent variables (Everitt & Dunn, 1991). It examines causal relationships between two or more variables and is based upon a linear equation system. However, it is noted that a path analysis is unique from other linear equation models in that the mediated
pathways (i.e., student-to-student connectedness) can be examined (Coffman & MacCallum, 2005). Thus, it explores a set of relationships between one or more independent variables, and one or more dependent variables (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1999). In this case it was conducted to parse out specific mediation effects. For this study it was used to determine if student-to-student connectedness mediated the relationships between the communication variables public speaking apprehension, speech anxiety, and communication competence prior to exposure (T1) to a public speaking course and post exposure (T2) to the course.

**RESULTS**

Hypothesis 1a stated that there would be a positive relationship between peer connectedness and change in students’ self-reports of public speaking anxiety from T1 to T2. A discrepancy score, subtracting T2 public speaking anxiety from T1 public speaking anxiety (M = 3.25, SD = 6.94), was created to represent change over time. Results supported H1a, $r = .20, p < .005$. Furthermore, a pairwise $t$ test found a significant difference between T1 public speaking anxiety and T2 public speaking anxiety, $t(361) = 8.91, p < .0001$. Results indicated that a sense of peer connectedness may reduce students’ public speaking anxiety from the start of the semester (M = 31.72, SD = 8.15) to the end of the semester (M = 28.48, SD = 7.42).

Hypothesis 1b stated that there would be a positive relationship between peer connectedness and change in students’ self-reports of public speaking apprehension...
from T\textsuperscript{1} to T\textsuperscript{2}. Again, a discrepancy score was created subtracting T\textsuperscript{2} public speaking apprehension from T\textsuperscript{1} public speaking apprehension (\(M = 1.82, SD = 4.65\)). Results supported H1b, \(r = .14, p < .05\). Furthermore, a pairwise \(t\) test found a significant difference in students’ self-report of public speaking apprehension from T\textsuperscript{1} to T\textsuperscript{2}, \(t(331) = 7.12, p < .0001\). Overall, a sense of peer connectedness may reduce students’ public speaking apprehension from the start of the semester (\(M = 18.87, SD = 5.16\)) to the end of the semester (\(M = 17.01, SD = 4.80\)).

Hypothesis two predicted that there would be a positive relationship between peer connectedness and change in students’ self-reports of communication competence from T\textsuperscript{1} to T\textsuperscript{2}. Again, a discrepancy score was created subtracting T\textsuperscript{1} communication competence from T\textsuperscript{2} communication competence (\(M = 4.55, SD = 10.62\)). Results supported H2, \(r = .20, p < .001\). Moreover, a pairwise \(t\) test found a significant difference between T\textsuperscript{1} communication competence and T\textsuperscript{2} communication competence, \(t(344) = -7.95, p < .0001\). Thus, a sense of peer connectedness may help to further enhance students’ perceptions of their communication competence from the start of the semester (\(M = 79.71, SD = 12.87\)) to the end of the semester (\(M = 84.27, SD = 11.14\)).

Hypothesis 3a predicted student-to-student connectedness will mediate the association between students’ T\textsuperscript{1} public speaking anxiety and their T\textsuperscript{2} communication competence (Figure 1). There was a direct association between T\textsuperscript{1} public speaking anxiety and student-to-student connectedness (\(\beta = -.14, p < .05\)), as well as between T\textsuperscript{1} public speaking anxiety and T\textsuperscript{2} communication competence (\(\beta = -.38, p < .0001\)). However, when student-to-
Notes: Mediation model relating public speaking anxiety (T1), student-to-student connectedness, and communication competence (T2). Values represent standardized regression coefficients. The value inside the parentheses denotes the effect of public speaking anxiety (T1) on communication competence (T2) with student-to-student connectedness as the mediator. Note. *p < .0001, **p < .05.

**Figure 1. Mediation Model: Public Speaking Anxiety**

Student connectedness was included in the model, the association between T1 public speaking anxiety and T2 communication competence was reduced (β = -.35, p < .0001), and the Sobel test revealed partial mediation (z = -3.25, p < .005).

Similarly, hypothesis 3b predicted student-to-student connectedness will mediate the association between students’ T1 public speaking apprehension and their T2 communication competence (Figure 2). There was a direct association between T1 public speaking apprehension and student-to-student connectedness (β = -.13, p < .05), as well as between T1 public speaking app-
Notes: Mediation model relating public speaking apprehension (T1), student-to-student connectedness, and communication competence (T2). Values represent standardized regression coefficients. The value inside the parentheses denotes the effect of public speaking apprehension (T1) on communication competence (T2) with student-to-student connectedness as the mediator. Note. *p < .0001, **p < .05

Figure 2. Mediation Model: Public Speaking Apprehension

prehension and T2 communication competence (β = -.40, p < .0001). However, when student-to-student connectedness was included in the model, the association between T1 public speaking apprehension and T2 communication competence was reduced (β = -.35, p < .0001), and the Sobel test revealed partial mediation (z = -3.61, p < .0005). Overall, in public speaking courses, positive perceptions of peer connectedness may temper the relationship between students’ anxiety at the start of the
DISCUSSION

The Connected Classroom Climate Inventory represents the development of a positive classroom climate through supportive student-to-student communication (Dwyer, et al., 2004). However, scant research has addressed student-to-student interactions in the college classroom (Johnson, 2009). This is surprising, given that the connected classroom climate is strongly associated with positive instructional outcomes. For example, Johnson found that a positive relationship exists between student-to-student connectedness and perceived affective learning. The aim of this study was to determine the impact student-to-student connectedness may have on students’ perceptions of their public speaking anxiety, communication apprehension, and communication competence in public speaking courses. Overall, the results indicated student-to-student connectedness may alleviate students’ anxiety or apprehension toward public speaking and enhance their perceptions of communication competence over the course of a semester in the public speaking course. Students who perceived a sense of peer connectedness in the classroom experienced decreases in their public speaking anxiety and communication apprehension, as well as an increase in self-perceived communication competence. Therefore, familiarity and acceptance among classroom peers may allow students to become more comfortable communicating in public speaking courses. Students who perceive con-
nectedness in the classroom may have more opportunities to communicate with their peers, which in turn, leads to increases in self-perceived communication competence. Moreover, communication with peers may offer students the opportunity to discover that their audience is more supportive of them than critical. Therefore, positive perceptions of student-to-student connectedness may help reduce students’ levels of anxiety and apprehension in public speaking courses.

This study’s results emphasize the importance of establishing a safe haven for students in public speaking courses, in which they perceive a sense of connectedness with their peers early on in a semester. Therefore, instructors should provide students time to communicate with one another and develop familiarity with their peers during the initial start of a semester. Likewise, given the importance of connectedness in public speaking courses and its affect on students’ learning and perceptions, training in building relationships in the classroom may be essential for the instructors (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Prior research indicated that students may reciprocate instructors' communicative behaviors in the classroom (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Johnson, 2009). If instructors engage in positive, supportive behaviors, such as smiling, students may in turn use similar behaviors with one another in the classroom.

Overall, these outcomes yield several implications for public speaking instructors and students. One implication is the public speaking course should be included in learning communities. Edwards and Walker (2007) found that students who participated in learning communities experienced a reduction in communication apprehension. In a learning community, students typically
take several courses in the fall and spring semesters with the same group of students. Doing so enables students to develop a small community of peers who have an area of common interest (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006). Learning communities also offer an opportunity for social integration which, in turn, increases the likelihood of retention and academic success (Bean & Eaton, 2001). It may be beneficial to students if public speaking courses were included in learning communities. This inclusion will allow students to develop a sense of peer connectedness before entering their public speaking classrooms. Future research should consider learning communities and the influence of established connectedness among students prior to entering the classroom.

Beyond the traditional classroom setup, researchers also should determine the influence online public speaking courses may have on the development of student-to-student connectedness. As an extension of distance learning, colleges and universities are increasingly offering online courses (Clark & Jones, 2001). Online public speaking courses may create especially difficult challenges for instructors as they try to foster a connected classroom climate. Vanhorn, Pearson, and Child (2008) found that instructors across courses had difficulty transforming face-to-face courses to an online course format. Furthermore, Umphrey and Sherblom (2008) reported computer-mediated communication can reduce the experience of connectedness for students. Yet, many online public speaking courses exist and often use a hybrid course format, in which students only meet face-to-face for presentations (Clark & Jones, 2001). Overall, Clark and Jones found students were attracted to online public speaking courses because they
had to come to campus less frequently. However, in terms of students’ communication skills and based on the results of this study, a connected classroom climate is important to the success of students enrolled in public speaking courses. Given the integration of technology into public speaking courses, future research should examine student-to-student connectedness across public speaking course formats (i.e., traditional, hybrid, online) to determine if the course format impedes or facilitates a connected classroom climate.

Future research should also address the interaction between instructors’ communicative attributes and student-to-student connectedness and the overall affect they have on student anxiety and communication competence. This study found student-to-student connectedness partially mediated the relationships between \( T_1 \) speech anxiety and apprehension and \( T_2 \) communication competence. Positive perceptions of peer connectedness did not completely eradicate students’ anxiety or apprehension, therefore future research must also include other classroom variables (e.g., teacher nonverbal immediacy) and consider the combination of peer connectedness and instructor communicative attributes. Johnson (2009) obtained a positive association between perceived instructor nonverbal immediacy and student-to-student connectedness. Frisby and Martin (2010) found perceived rapport with instructors and students was positively associated with student-to-student connectedness. As an extension of current connectedness research, researchers should examine whether instructors’ communicative attributes (e.g., humor, responsiveness, relevance, affinity seeking) leads to increases in perceived connectedness over the course of a semester.
Moreover, the Connected Classroom Climate Inventory may serve as a useful assessment tool for researchers and instructors. As a semester progresses this measure can be used to gauge the student-to-student connectedness construct in order to determine whether it changes over time, based on what takes place in the classroom.

In light of these results, limitations must also be considered. First, this study is based on students’ self-reports of what happens in the classroom, not necessarily the actual behaviors that occur. Smythe and Hess (2005) found that disagreement exists between students’ reports of instructor behaviors in the classroom and trained observer reports. Second, the data used in this study was from the surveys completed at both the beginning and the end of the semester. Students who do not attend class regularly may have different perceptions of connectedness than those students who completed the in-class surveys. It may be useful for future research to use online surveys to allow students the opportunity to complete measures outside of class to determine the association between course attendance and perceptions of student-to-student connectedness. Third, the methodology prohibits any casual statements to be made for this study. However, this study does indicate relationships exist between student-to-student connectedness and the communication attributes public speaking anxiety, communication apprehension, and communication competence. Ultimately, the results obtained in this study suggest that students’ perceptions of classroom connectedness can affect their communication abilities. This study’s outcomes suggest the change in students’ level of communication anxiety and competence over the course of a semester in public speaking.
classes were influenced by their positive perceptions of student-to-student connectedness. These findings imply that when students are familiar with each other and accept one another, they are able to become more comfortable with their ability to communicate in the public speaking courses.

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Manuscripts published in the Annual are not restricted to any particular methodology or approach. They must, however, address issues that are significant to the basic course (defined broadly). Articles in the Annual may focus on the basic course in traditional or non-traditional settings. The Annual uses a blind reviewing process. Two or three members of the Editorial Board read and review each manuscript. The Editor will return a manuscript without review if it is clearly outside the scope of the basic course.

Manuscripts submitted to the Annual must conform to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th edition (2009). Submitted manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, and in 12 point standard font. They should not exceed 30 pages, exclusive of tables and references, nor be under consideration by any other publishing outlet at the time of submission. By submitting to the Annual, authors maintain that they will not submit their manuscript to another outlet without first withdrawing it from consideration.
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Stephen K. Hunt, Editor

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If you have any questions about the Annual or your submission, contact the Editor by telephone at 309-438-7279 or by email at BCCA@ilstu.edu.

All complete submissions must be received by March 18, 2011 to receive full consideration for volume 24 of the Basic Communication Course Annual.