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Research Article

Conceptualizing Positive and Negative Experiences and Responses in the Basic Communication Course

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Abstract

The present study used qualitative analysis of 259 students' positive and negative experiences in the basic course and the ways in which they responded to these events. Students described four negative experiences: poor academic performance, time management, communication apprehension, and teacher driven challenges and four positive experiences: relational, growth, and presentation success. Students responded to these negative experiences using behavioral change, support seeking, doing nothing, and responded to positive experiences using emotive responses, communication with others, engaging in celebrating activities, applying skills, and lacking celebration.

Students encounter a wide range of experiences in academia and, consequently, may seek diverse responses to these events. Previous literature highlights a variety of challenges that students face in higher education, including ineffective or misbehaving instructors (Kearney, Plax, Hays, & Ivey, 1991), distractions (e.g., technology use; Fried, 2008), negative feedback (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010), financial burdens and economic hardship (Hoachlander, Sikora,

& Horn, 2003; Reynolds, 2013), heavy or difficult courses and workloads (Lindsay & Rogers, 2010; Mottet, Parker-Raley, Beebe, & Cunningham, 2007), and competing priorities (e.g., full time jobs, Byrnes & Frisby, 2014), among others.

In response to these challenges, it is important for students to develop the efficacy to overcome academic challenges, or to avoid efficacy decreases, as higher academic efficacy is associated with a host of positive outcomes including academic achievement (e.g., Alfasi, 2003), goal-setting and actual goal attainment (e.g., Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992), good attendance (e.g., Collins & Bissell, 2002), and motivation (e.g., Schunk, 1991). Further, research has demonstrated that a tendency to appreciate positive experiences predicts college student well-being (Bryant, 1989).

Valenzano, Wallace, and Morreale (2014) argued that the basic communication course is a prominent force nationally across universities, and Beebe (2013) asserted that the basic course is a “front porch” to our discipline. Taken together, these assertions suggest that the challenges students face in the basic communication course may be foundational to understanding student development as they progress in the major. Further, because the basic course has “deep ties” that “bind” it to general education for all majors (Valenzano et al., 2014, p. 363), identifying the challenges students face in this course are important to all disciplines and to the larger university system who are often concerned about student preparation for upper level courses, retention, and graduation. As such, the focus of the present study is to understand the positive and negative challenges students identify facing in the basic communication course and how they respond to those challenges.

College Student Experiences in the Basic Communication Course

The basic communication course is lauded for building lifelong communication skills (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010) that are critical for personal and professional success (Morreale & Pearson, 2008), promoting critical thinking, preparing students to exert control over their lives, building self-confidence (Hunt, Novak, Sendlak & Meyer, 2005), and reducing communication apprehension (Ford & Wolvin, 1993). Hence, the benefits of the basic communication course are well documented in the literature; yet, few studies (for exception, see Cohen, 2012) have qualitatively explored student perceptions of the positive and negative experiences they face in the basic communication course, nor how they may respond to those events.

One notable exception is Cohen's (2012) case study in which he interviewed 21 students about the strengths, weaknesses, and needed changes to the basic communication course. The results of his study articulated five strengths of the course, including small class size, guided practice opportunities, real world applicability, opportunities for self-reflection, and focus on the public speaking process. The weakness focused on unclear links among course components, lack of connection to students' chosen major, insufficient focus on public speaking, unclear assignment expectations, and design of the interviewing unit.

The current study extends Cohen's work by identifying a student-articulated typology of the nature and scope of their positive and negative experiences in the basic communication course and how they respond to their experiences in the basic course. To do so, we proposed the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the negative or challenging experiences, if any, students identify in the basic communication course?

RQ2: What are the positive or successful experiences, if any, students identify in the basic communication course?

Further, it is unclear how students communicatively respond to these challenges. Although Cohen's study explored students' perceptions of the basic course, even fewer studies have explored how students respond to positive and negative experiences in the basic course. In a recent study, Hosek, Frisby, Waldbuesser, and Rubinsky (2016) identified *general* academic challenges (not specific to the basic course) and the coping mechanisms students used in response to these challenges. Connecting their work to the current investigation, students in their study who experienced higher levels of anxiety and communication apprehension (CA) tended to respond by avoiding situations that required oral communication (e.g., the basic communication course), and similar to other research findings, were less likely to seek support from peers, advisors, or teachers (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989). Students who are struggling may visit office hours (Jones, 2008), seek support services (Bandura, 1977), or leave the university setting altogether.

Conversely, students may respond entirely different to positive academic experiences. To our knowledge, instructional research has not explored how, if at all, students communicate their responses to positive experiences in the course. For example, students may celebrate positive experiences. Langston (1994) argued that

the act of celebrating could enhance and even prolong positive feelings for long periods of time. People tend to share good news with others (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2007) as one way to appreciate or savor the experience (Langston, 1994). Research has demonstrated that a tendency to appreciate positive experiences predicts college student well-being (Bryant, 1989), is linked to optimism, self-control, and self-esteem, and is negatively related to hopelessness and depression (Bryant, 2003). Thus, our second set of research questions focus on how students respond to experiences in the basic course, whether positive or negative:

RQ3: How do students communicate in response, if at all, to negative experiences or challenges they face in the basic communication course?

RQ4: How do students communicate in response, if at all, to positive experiences they face in the basic communication course?

Method

Participants

Data for this study was taken from a larger data set collected to examine college student resilience, learning, and satisfaction. The dataset for the present study included 259 participants from a Mid-western university. Of the 259 participants, 128 students reported on *positive experiences*, and demographic data for this part of the sample indicated ages ranged from age 18 to 27 ($M = 19.22$. $SD = 1.2$). There were 71 participants identifying as female (55%) and 56 who identified as male (43.4%), and two participants typed “other” for their gender (1.6%). In terms of race and ethnicity, 111 identified as Caucasian (86%), five identified as African American (3.9%), two Asian (1.6%), three Hispanic (2.3%), six Multiethnic (3.9 %), and 3 indicated “other” (2.3%). Of the 259 participants, 131 students reported on *negative experiences*, with ages ranging from 18 to 30 ($M = 19.22$. $SD = 1.2$). There were 76 participants who identified as male (58%) and 55 participants identifying as female (42%). In terms of race and ethnicity, 112 identified as Caucasian (85.5%), two identified as African American (3.8%), six Asian (4.6%), three Hispanic (2.3%), four Multiethnic (3.1 %), and one participant declined to indicate their race/ethnicity. The majority of participants were first-year or sophomore students, and approximately 20

majors were represented. All of the participants were part of a public speaking basic communication course. The course was only taught in small sections of 25 people or less and only face-to-face sections were used.

Procedures and Materials

The institutional review board approved the research as an ongoing project both for the larger study and for subsequent studies using the same data. All participants gave consent for their responses to be used in research and received course credit for participating in the survey. Only four questions from the survey were used for the present study. The survey was completed at the end of the semester after the majority of assignments had been completed and graded. The participants were randomized to respond to open-ended questions relating to either positive or negative experiences in the current semester.

The students who answered positive experience questions were asked to (a) recount something that has gone well in the current semester and (b) how they celebrated that positive experience. In contrast, students who received the negative experience questions were asked to recount (a) what, if anything, had gone wrong in the course and (b) how they coped with that negative experience.

Data Analysis

This study employed an inductive thematic analysis using Owen's (1984) criteria. This approach allowed themes and subthemes to arise naturally from the open-ended questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Owen's (1984) approach utilizes three criteria to form themes and subthemes: forcefulness, repetition, and reoccurrence. Forcefulness was displayed in the data when participants used font size, italics, bolding, underlining, or excessive punctuation to indicate the importance of their answer. The next criterion, repetition, was evident when the same words were repeated in multiple answers. Last, reoccurrence, was present in the data when similar meanings or ideas were present throughout the answers.

The authors first engaged in primary-cycle coding, where they individually looked for codes throughout the data (Tracy, 2013). During this coding cycle, the authors read through the entire data set to identify a broad set of codes. Specifically, the authors used descriptive and *in vivo* coding to understand what was happening in the open-ended responses (Saldaña, 2016). From this, several first-level codes (codes that focus on what is evident in the data) were developed from the data (Tracy, 2013).

Next, the authors met face-to-face to engage in second-level coding, or organizing and synthesizing the data to make sense of the codes and develop second-level codes to explain the patterns evident in the first-level codes (Tracy, 2013). From this process, four major themes were identified for academic challenges in the basic course: *Poor Academic Performance*, *Time Management*, *Communication Apprehension*, and *Teacher-Driven*. Further, four themes were evident in the data about students coping with academic challenges in the basic course: *Behavioral Change*, *Support Seeking*, *Doing Nothing*, and *Acceptance of Situation*. Additionally, three themes were found for student positive experiences in the basic course: *Relational/Classmate*, *Growth*, and *Perceived Presentation Success*. Lastly, five themes were identified for positive outcomes in the basic course: *Emotive Response*, *Communication with Others*, *Engaged in Celebrating Activity*, *Apply Skills*, and *Lack of Celebration*.

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question explored the negative experiences or challenges students faced in the basic communication course. Students discussed four main themes: (a) *Poor Academic Performance*, (b) *Time Management*, (c) *Communication Apprehension*, and (d) *Teacher-Driven*. The main theme of *Poor Academic Performance* had two subthemes: *Low Grades on Speeches* and *Low Grades on Quizzes*. The second main theme, *Time Management*, contained three subthemes: *Absences*, involved two subthemes: *Lacking Clarity* and *Lacking Feedback*. The main theme *Communication Apprehension* did not have any subthemes. Table 1 provides additional examples of each main theme and subtheme for RQ1.

Table 1
Challenges with the Basic Course

Theme	Examples
Poor Academic Performance	
Low Grades on Speeches	“I wanted to get an A in the class but got a bad grade on my first big speech, mostly because I went over the time limit.”
Low Grades on Quizzes	“I had issues with the quizzes. I answered one too many questions and received a 0 and then I forgot to do one.”
Time Management	
Absences	“Missed classes.”
Missed Assignments	“Just missed a few quizzes.”
Lack of Preparation	“Lack of preparedness early in the class.”
Communication Apprehension	
	“I was nervous to do my speeches and would forget some information.”
Teacher-Driven	
Lacking Clarity	“My teacher was hard to understand and she made class work difficult because I felt the schedule was off and vaguely addressed.”
Lacking Feedback	“Certain grades weren't explained and it made my grade drop substantially.”

Poor academic performance. The main theme of *Poor Academic Performance*, was evident when students discussed doing poorly on assignments in the basic course. Specifically, students talked about receiving low grades. This theme contained two subthemes: *Low Grades on Speeches* and *Low Grades on Quizzes*. For the subtheme *Low Grades on Speeches*, the participants discussed perceived low grades on speeches they gave during class as a basic course challenge. For example, one participant stated, “My informative speech was not the score I wanted to get; I had trouble stating all my sources in my speech.” For the second subtheme, *Low Grades on Quizzes*, students

felt that receiving low grades or zeros on quizzes was an academic challenge they faced in the basic course. For instance, one student said, “Nothing. If anything, me receiving 0/9 on an online quiz for answering all the questions. This is a very dumb punishment.”

Time management. In the *Time Management* theme, students indicated facing academic difficulties when they did not properly utilize their time to prepare for the basic course. Specifically, students discussed problems with *Absences*, *Missed Assignments*, and *Lack of Preparation*. For *Absences*, students cited missing class as a challenge they had in the basic course. For example, one student stated, “I was absent 4 times instead of three, so that will bring my grade down a bit.” Additionally, students identified *Missed Assignments*, or not completing or turning in assignments on time, as an academic difficulty they faced. For example, one participant said, “It slipped my mind to take a couple of the quizzes and one of these surveys during the hectic semester when I had a lot going on.” Lastly, students cited *Lack of Preparation* as a problem they encountered. One example of this theme was when a participant said, “I waited to print out my outline the day of my speech.”

Communication apprehension. For this theme, students expressed that they faced challenges in the basic course because of their perceived fear of public speaking. Specifically, they cited that they were anxious and nervous to give speeches in the course, which caused problems for them including forgetting information or receiving a perceived low grade. For instance, one student stated, “I learned I was a horrible speaker and actually a lot more afraid of getting up in front of a crowd than I thought. Most of my speeches were unsuccessful.”

Teacher-driven. For the last main theme, *Teacher-Driven*, students discussed academic challenges based on perceived teacher-driven issues in the basic course. In this main theme, students talked about both perceived problems with teachers *Lacking Clarity* and *Lacking Feedback*. For instance, if students perceived that instructors lacked either verbal speaking clarity or were unclear when giving explanations, students felt this created problems for them in the basic course. For example, one student stated, “Serious lack of communication by graduate student to our students. We didn't get full communication about due dates/times/documents required, etc.” Further, students also struggled when the instructor was not able to provide feedback on speech related assignments that offered them enough time to attend to the feedback before for the next assignment. One example of lacking feedback was when one participant said, “The professor gave feedback from one

speech too late before the next so I got points off twice because I didn't know I was doing something wrong.”

Research Question 2

The second research question examined the ways that students coped with challenges in the basic course. Student disclosed four main themes throughout the responses, including *Behavioral Change*, *Support Seeking*, *Doing Nothing*, and *Acceptance of Situation*. The first main theme involved four subthemes: *Self-Adjust*, *Organization*, *Work Harder*, and *Prepared More*. The main themes *Support Seeking* and *Doing Nothing* did not have subthemes. The last main theme, *Acceptance of Situation*, had two subthemes: *Pep Talk* and *Just Dealt With It*. The following section will discuss each of these main themes and subthemes. Table 2 contains examples of each of the themes.

Table 2
Responding to Challenges in the Basic Course

Theme	Examples
Behavioral Change	
Self Adjust	“I started going to class regularly.”
Organization	“I made sure not to do that again and wrote all assignments in a planner.”
Work Harder	“I tried harder on the next speech.”
Prepared More	“I prepared better for the next speech.”
Support Seeking	“Went to the speech lab ¹ to clean my speech up and meet time.”
Doing Nothing	“There's nothing I can do.”
Acceptance of Situation	
Pep Talk	“I told myself it will be alright and I still have a good grade.”
Just Dealt With It	“I kind of just got over it.”

¹The communication lab is a resource provided at the institution where data was collected, which allows students to practice their speeches in front of trained lab workers.

Behavioral change. The first main theme dealt with the students' altering their behaviors in order to cope with the situation. Specifically, they changed their actions in the basic course in four ways: *Self-Adjust*, *Organization*, *Work Harder*, and *Prepared More*. The self-adjust subtheme involved the students modifying their behaviors in the class, such as attending the class regularly. For instance, one student said, "I took it one step at a time and picked a topic i thought would be interesting." For the organization subtheme, students disclosed that they adopted better planning methods to prepare for class, such as using a planner. For example, one participant said, "Tried to study more and set reminders to take them [quizzes]." In the next subtheme, *Work Harder*, students revealed that they put more effort into their assignments and class activities. For instance, one student stated, "I put in more time for my latest speech." Lastly, for prepared more, students discussed how they changed their preparation habits in order to be ready for the class. One example of this theme was when a student said, "begin preparations earlier the next time."

Support seeking. For this main theme students discussed how they sought support services to help them with the basic course. For instance, the students' discussed going to a communication lab (a service provided for practicing speeches at the institution where data was collected) to seek help with their speeches or talking with their instructor. Another student also stated, "I have talked to my COMS professor about something that we can do about the issue."

Doing nothing. The main theme *Doing Nothing* was evident when students stated that they did nothing to improve the situation. Based on the challenges, some students felt complacent or as if they could not do anything to address the issue. Specifically, students either could not do anything to help the situation or chose not to do anything. For example, one participant said, "There's nothing I can do."

Acceptance of the situation. For the main theme *Acceptance of the Situation*, students revealed that they just endured or tolerated the challenges they encountered in the basic course. In their responses, students indicated that they handled their challenges by either giving themselves a pep talk or just dealing with it. For *Pep Talk*, they discussed how they told themselves that they could still do well in the class. For instance, one student said, "I told myself I still had more opportunities to improve my speaking and grade." Additionally, some students stated they just got over or moved on from the situation, which was evident when one participant stated, "I just had to get over it. There wasn't anything I could do since it was already too late."

Research Question 3

The third research question explored how students described their positive experiences in the basic course. The main themes that were evident in the student responses included *Relational/Classmate*, *Growth*, and *Perceived Presentation Success*. The first main theme, *Relational/Classmate*, included three subthemes: *Climate*, *Students*, and *Teacher/Positive Feedback*. The second main theme, *Growth*, contained three subthemes: *Confidence*, *Developed Speaking Skills*, and *Perceived Reduction in Communication Apprehension*. *Perceived Presentation Success*, the last main theme, had two subthemes: *Good Grades on Speeches* and *Performance*. Examples of each of the themes can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3
Positive Experiences in the Basic Course

Theme	Examples
Relational/Classmate	
Climate	“We have a very good class environment.”
Students	“Creating strong bonds with my classmates has gone well for me this semester.”
Teacher/Positive Feedback	“I met some good people and Mrs. Webb has really taught me a lot about speaking.”
Growth	
Confidence	“I learned how to be more confident when giving a speech.”
Developed Speaking Skills	“I feel that I have grown as a public speaker and my skills have greatly improved.”
Perceived Reduction in Communication Apprehension	“Getting used to speaking in front of a group of people. I'm not as nervous as I was to start off.”
Perceived Presentation Success	
Good Grades on Speeches	“I have reached the time lengths on most of the speeches, which historically has been something that is difficult for me to do. Also, I have received good grades on the majority of my speeches.”
Performance	“I presented most of my speeches well in class. I seemed to impress my instructor and classmates.”

Relational/classmate. This main theme was evident when students discussed positive relational elements in the basic course. The subthemes included: *Climate*, *Students*, and *Teacher/Positive Feedback*. Specifically, students felt that the overall environment of the class was a positive aspect of their experience in the basic course, which was apparent when one participant said:

[This course] was my favorite course this semester. I really looked forward to going to class (even on speaking days.) In [this class] my speaking skills really improved. I keep better eye contact and I am more confident in front of crowds.

Further, they also cited bonds made with classmates as positive outcomes of their basic course class. For instance, one participant stated, “I made friends from all types of friend groups and have also gained confidence when speaking.” Lastly, they viewed interactions with their instructors and positive feedback from instructors as positive experiences in the basic course, which was evident when one student said, “Coms has gone pretty good overall. I have enjoyed my instructor and class and feel that the course has made me feel more comfortable about the speeches.”

Growth. The *Growth* main theme involved responses that indicated students’ felt as if they had developed their skills, strategies, and self-perceptions in the basic course. Specifically, students felt growth in their confidence levels, speaking skills, and reduction in communication apprehension. For confidence, students felt that they grew more confident in their public speaking abilities throughout the semester, which was apparent when one student stated, “My confidence when giving speeches really escalated.” Further, they also felt they generally gained more presentation skills and strategies. For example, one participant said, “My public speaking skills have gotten better.” Lastly, they perceived that they had less apprehension toward public speaking because of the basic course. For instance, one student stated, “I am no longer afraid of public speaking.”

Perceived presentation success. The last main theme about student positive experiences was *Perceived Presentation Success*, which was when students indicated that they had successful presentations throughout the semester. They identified two areas in which they experienced success, including *Good Grades on Speeches* and *Performance*. Specifically, students perceived that they earned good grades on their speeches during the basic course. For instance, one student said, “good grades on speeches.” Further, students also felt they performed well on the speeches during the class, but did not mention grades. For example, one participant stated, “I feel that my speeches improved each time I gave one.”

Research Question 4

The last research question looked at how students celebrated their successes in the basic course. Based on student responses, five main themes were identified: *Emotive Response*, *Communication with Others*, *Engaged in Celebrating Activity*, *Apply Skills*,

and *Nothing*. The first main theme, *Emotive Response*, had three subthemes: *Happy*, *Confidence*, and *Pride*. Next, the *Communication with Others* main theme involved two subthemes: *Parents* and *Friends*. Further, the *Engaged in Celebrating Activity* main theme contained three subthemes: *Drinks*, *With Friends*, and *Eat Out*. The fourth main theme, *Apply Skills*, also had three subthemes: *More Speaking*, *Used in Other Classes*, and *Continued Working Hard*. The last main theme, *Nothing*, did not have any subthemes. Examples of the themes can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4
Positive Celebrations in the Basic Course

Theme	Examples
Emotive Response	
Happy	“Becoming happier with myself and has become easier for me to speak to others.”
Confidence	“I feel that I can give a good speech anytime in the future.”
Pride	“I was proud of myself.”
Communication with Others	
Parents	“After every speech, I would call my mom and tell her how I thought I did then call her again when I got my grade.”
Friends	“Just tell my friends I am happy because I did my presentation well.”
Engaged in Celebrating Activity	
Drinks	“Booze.”
With Friends	“I celebrated with friends.”
Eat Out	“After a good speech I usually would get some food at a nice place on court street.”
Apply skills	
More Speaking	“I’m the president of a student organization, so to celebrate my improved skills I actually put on an event with my org and did a little public speaking at the event.”
Used in Other Classes	“I use what I have learned in [this class] when I speak in my other classes.”
Continued Working Hard	“I continued to try hard and study for that class in order to keep up my good grades.”
Lack of Celebration	“The above situation is rewarding but there was no celebration involved.”

Emotive response. This main theme was evident when students' expressed that they celebrated with emotional reactions. Specifically, they expressed happiness, confidence, and pride. Participants indicated that they both felt happier and expressed happiness by smiling or having other positive reactions to their experience in the basic course. For example, one student stated, "I once again smiled and was just glad for my improvement." Further, students also celebrated by feeling more confident in themselves and their speaking abilities, which was evident when one participant said, "My confidence gain has made me feel better about myself." Lastly, they also celebrated by being proud of themselves or bragging about their positive outcomes in the basic course. For instance, one student stated, "I walk with my head held high."

Communication with others. In this main theme, students expressed that they celebrated by communicating with others about their positive experiences. For instance, they cited talking with *Parents* and *Friends* after a positive outcome in the basic course. More specifically, students disclosed that they called their mom or parents to tell them about a positive occurrence. For example, one student stated that they "told my parents." Additionally, students talked with their friends about the positive experiences, which was apparent when one participant said, "I laughed with my friend who sat next to me about it. We supported each other."

Engaged in celebrating activity. Students also indicated that they celebrated by engaging in activities to acknowledge the positive experience. Specifically, they cited having drinks, going out with friends, and eating out as ways that they celebrated positive occurrences in the basic course. For example, students stated that they indulged in alcoholic beverages to celebrate their positive experiences. Further, they also discussed going out with friends after having a positive experience in the basic course. For example, one student stated, "I relaxed and enjoyed time with friends." Lastly, students also treated themselves to food in order to celebrate a positive outcome in the basic course; for instance, one participated responded by just writing, "ice cream."

Apply skills. For this main theme students revealed that they celebrated by using their new skills both in and out of the basic course class. Three subthemes were evident in this main theme: *More Speaking*, *Used in Other Classes*, and *Continued Working Hard*. For instance, some students actually sought out speaking opportunities outside of the class to celebrate their newly acquired skills. Further, some students felt as if they could voice their opinions or use public speaking skills in other courses after having a positive experience in the basic course. For example, one student stated,

“by talking more in all of my other classes.” Lastly, some students felt that continuing to work hard was a form of celebration, which was evident when one student stated, “I just kept pushing and doing my best!”

Lack of celebration. This main theme involved students stating that they did not celebrate positive experiences in the basic course. Many students indicated that while the situation was positive, they did not do anything to commemorate the event. Students’ lack of celebration was evident when one participant stated, “I haven’t really celebrated.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore negative and positive experiences that basic communication course students face. Further, we explored the communication strategies that students used to overcome the negative events and how they potentially celebrated positive experiences. This study provides a foundation for understanding student perceptions of negative experiences and challenges in a specific course, as well as the ways in which students differ in their productive and anti-productive communicative and behavioral responses. Additionally, this study provides an important framework for helping students to value positive experiences. These experiences, and the responses to the experiences, can boost or hinder students’ affect toward the course, a critical outcome of interest to instructional communication scholars and practitioners.

The first contribution of our study is a typology of negative experiences or challenges and positive student experiences in the basic communication course. This study extends Cohen’s (2012) work by moving beyond curricular strengths and weaknesses of the basic course to offer a nuanced understanding of potential negative experiences that may damage affect for a course’s content and student learning from students’ perspectives such as unclear teaching or inadequate teacher feedback. Our study attempted to address Myers and Goodboy’s (2015) call by doing more than identifying if a student liked a course or an instructor, but instead defined behaviors students engage in or avoided that potentially contribute to decreased affect for a course (e.g., self-adjusting).

Extant research on the basic communication course and instructional communication highlights the positive outcomes of student affect for a course, connected climate (Dwyer et al., 2004), and academic success (Kranstuber, Carr, & Hosek, 2012), and our findings are in line with the positive outcomes of these studies. Our study also provides a typology of positive experiences in the basic

communication course that may give rise to increasing feelings of affect for the course, its recommended behaviors, and relationships built in the course. As such our study reinforces previous research that highlights the value students place on the basic communication course (Cohen, 2012; Morreale et al., 2010). In particular, students in our study reinforced the beneficial impact of connected classroom climate between teachers and classmates (Dwyer et al., 2004). Importantly, positive class climate is valuable because it is positively related to student affective learning (Johnson, 2009), student verbal participation in class, preparedness (Sidelinger & Booth-Butterfield, 2010), and intent to persist in college.

Perhaps not surprisingly, students in our study equated positive experiences with receiving “good grades” on speeches and having “performed successfully” during presentations, which arguably is tied to students feeling that they have succeeded academically in the course. What is unclear from this finding, and should be investigated by future researchers, is what students perceive to be “academic success” and if that is tied to students who are more grade oriented versus learning or growth-mindset oriented. In our study, students typically mentioned “good grades” on their speeches but rarely offered letter grades to illustrate what they meant by “good.” This is noteworthy given our “college lite” environment (Mottet et al., 2007) that exposes the fact that what constitutes “good grades” to instructors or institutions may or may not align with students’ perceptions of academic excellence.

A second contribution of our study is the understanding of how students respond to negative and positive experiences in the basic communication course. In negative experiences, students illustrated a typology of behavioral approaches to change such as self-adjusting poor patterns of behaviors (e.g., not going to class) for positive self-adjustments (e.g., going to class), working harder on assignments, and preparing more in advance for presentations. Similarly, students worked to cognitively reframe events through self-talk in the face of negative experiences (e.g., a poor grade on one assignment did not tarnish an overall course grade) and avoiding cognitive rumination by accepting the situation as it was (i.e., “just dealt with it”).

In terms of positive experiences, students seemed to have less range in their ability to express, if at all, how they celebrated their successes in the basic course. Those that did discuss how they celebrated success tended to discuss internal feelings of happiness, confidence, and pride in their accomplishments. Consistent with Emotional Response Theory (Mehrabian, 1981; Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006), students’ positive emotional states can determine their likelihood to approach or avoid the course and its recommended behaviors, so eliciting positive emotions is

beneficial for course affect. Several students indicated that they communicated with friends and family to share their good news or engaged in celebratory activities (e.g., eating out with friends). Importantly, many students commented on the extent to which their celebration would be functional towards helping them meet future goals in other courses or activities. This form of celebration was noteworthy because it tied directly to behavioral learning goals whereby students use recommended behaviors in a course. This was evident in our study as students indicated, with rich descriptions, that their celebration of a good grade or increased confidence was to seek out additional speaking opportunities or continue working hard like they did in the basic course in their other classes.

Unfortunately, a third contribution from our study was the illumination that students do nothing to cope with the challenges they face in the basic communication course. Likewise, many students do not celebrate their successes. Although fewer students indicated *Doing Nothing* in response to negative experiences in the basic course, far more indicated that they did nothing to celebrate their success. Ultimately, these illustrated a lack of celebration for positive outcomes and experiences in the basic course. Hence, our results provide opportunities for basic course instructors, administrators, students, and family members to reach at-risk students in the course. Perhaps more poignantly, our results point to missed opportunities to show students how to value, appreciate, and savor their earned successes in the basic course. When we do so, this may enhance student self-efficacy, resilience, and retention in the basic course and college.

Implications

One implication from our study is that basic course instructors and administrators can lean on the positive experiences students shared in our study (e.g., positive climate with classmates and teachers, confidence in their speaking skills) to foster a collaborative climate of celebratory support as part of the curriculum. It appears from our data that students may not know how to celebrate their successes in the basic course; perhaps, basic course instructors can engage students in a discussion and identify ways to celebrate achievements and build in collective celebration (e.g., food celebration) to punctuate the importance of academic achievements throughout the curriculum.

Next, instructors should work to create positive environments in the classroom to help students feel more comfortable with their peers and instructor. For example,

basic course instructors can use different activities throughout the year that require students to talk to other classmates so that they can build relationships with several different peers. Forming relationships with other students not only helps instructors to build a better classroom environment, but it also allows students to feel more comfortable when speaking in class.

Additionally, based on the negative challenges, instructors can learn what they can do to avoid creating challenges for students. Specifically, one of the challenges that students faced was a teacher-driven problem, which included lack of clarity and lack of feedback. In order to avoid these challenges, instructors can make sure they are clear in due dates and students fully understand assignments. A couple suggestions to help clarify due dates include making sure students have access to the course schedule and the due dates are correct on the schedule. In addition, instructors could send weekly or bi-weekly e-mails to students reminding them of due dates. Further, instructors could use text message type applications, such as Remind or GroupMe, to send students reminders of due dates. Additionally, instructors should make sure they are getting feedback to students with sufficient time for students to read over the feedback before the next assignment. If instructors are clear and give timely feedback to students, it could help reduce the challenges students face in the basic communication course. Ultimately, this is important because, as students in this study noted, public speaking naturally induces communication apprehension; therefore, being clear and giving feedback in an appropriate amount of time can reduce student anxiety around speeches and other course assignments.

Limitations and Future Research

There are two main limitations to this study. The first stems from the lack of detail in the responses. As the study was a part of a larger internal assessment and was required for participants, the length of the survey may have caused fatigue for the students who answered these questions after spending a substantial amount of time in the survey, decreasing incentive to give detailed responses. In general, this resulted in students often seeming to name the impetus or identify blame for subsequent challenges rather than identify the specific challenge.

The second limitation is the lack of diversity in the participants. The majority of participants were first-year and sophomore students, thus making it difficult to generalize the results to a wider range of student experiences. However, this sample

is consistent with the typical basic course demographic composition. Finally, as success is subjective, future research should examine how students gauge success as it would add a more robust understanding of their perceived positive and negative experiences.

Conclusion

This study identified students' academic challenges and responses in the basic communication course. This information is helpful for general education stakeholders, academic success advisors, students, peers, and basic communication course administrators and staff. Given the importance and value of foundational courses such as the basic communication course, identifying the challenges students face offers insight towards areas to strengthen and clarify in the curriculum, provide support to students in ways that promote behavioral change, and engage students in actions that celebrate their successes—all of which can foster academic success.

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