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Editor’s Note to Volume 6 of the 
*Journal of Communication Pedagogy*

**Back to Business as Usual—Or Not: Pedagogy of Renewal**

Deanna D. Sellnow ©

This volume marks my last one as editor of the *Journal of Communication Pedagogy*. As I finish up, I want to say that it truly has been an honor to work with Dr. Renee Kaufmann from the University of Kentucky (Associate Editor) as we worked together to shape the journal into one that highlights instructional communication (a.k.a. teaching and learning) as it occurs across communication contexts. I also want to publicly thank all my dear colleagues who served on the Editorial Board during these challenging times. Your thoughtful reviews were critical to our success. I fully realize that when we all signed on to the project we had no idea what was coming in terms of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the myriad secondary crises it manifested worldwide. Standard operating procedures and “business as usual” were abruptly thrown into chaos as we were forced to reimagine how we do what we do when in-person interaction was removed as a communication channel option. Thank you for hanging in there with us!

As I reflect on what transpired during my tenure as editor, particularly because I am a scholar who studies instructional communication as it occurs in risk and crisis contexts, I have found myself at once:

a. **frustrated** when I observed spokespersons failing to follow best practices based on our research,
b. **convicted** by the fact that we are failing to get what we know out to those working professionals that we are intending to help,
c. **proud** to be part of the higher education community of professionals that demonstrated amazing resilience in spite of the challenges, and now
d. **motivated** to use our return to campus as an opportunity to embrace and enact a **pedagogy of renewal** in what we do and how we do it.
I am inspired to be among those dedicated to transforming our research agendas and teaching practices into meaningful work that strategically takes on the structural inequities embedded in so many of our systems. Thus, this volume is devoted to showcasing articles and essays that begin to embrace that pedagogy of renewal. Whereas resilience speaks to making sense of and surviving a crisis event (which the education industry achieved in navigating our operations throughout the lockdown), renewal is our opportunity to “fundamentally alter the form, structure, and direction” of standard day-to-day operations and practices (Weick, 1993, p. 78). I hope this volume represents the beginning of a reimagined theory-driven and research-informed praxis focused on preparing future generations to be what Zoe Weil (2016) describes as solutionaries—people with the knowledge, tools, and motivation to create a more sustainable, equitable, and peaceful world. Maybe a positive outcome from the pandemic mega-crisis is a space it created for transformative learning to take root, grow, and flourish.

**References**


A Pedagogy of Consilience and Renewal

Carolyn Calloway-Thomas

Keywords: culture, civic engagement, critical thinking, empathy, geography, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Abstract: This essay calls for a pedagogy of consilience and renewal as a dynamic fusion of research and practices in order to provide a more coherent way of examining some of the keen, interlaced variables that trouble the academy and society. The project challenges scholars to study five key scholarship of learning variables that should help transform the way we look at pedagogy for the betterment of North American society and beyond. The variables—a quintile—are knowledge, geography, critical thinking, civic engagement, and empathy.

Introduction

“I can’t breathe,” said George Floyd repeatedly 20 times, as he begged for his life in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020, while police officer Derek Chauvin knelt for 9 minutes on his neck. Despite Floyd’s moving, haunting pleas for his life, Chauvin remained tone-deaf and just kept kneeling, creating awful physical indentations in Mr. Floyd’s neck, which are too graphic for many to view on television. All who witnessed the event, saw the tape, or heard about Chauvin’s cruel actions were outraged, and many began sustained protests against police brutality and for racial justice. The killing of Mr. Floyd not only highlighted the gross injustices and cruelties that characterized Black lives during slavery, but it also called special attention to systemic and legally sanctioned discrimination.

Moreover, the killing reminded citizens of Jim Crow laws that thwarted Black progress such that today, according to Egginton (2018), “The average wealth of black families is less than a tenth of that of white families” (p. 106). The civil rights movement and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “March on Washington” speech on August 28, 1963, also dramatized the cruel effects of racial segregation and inequality on Black lives, which matter!
But denials of full justice for African Americans and others also have had deleterious effects overall because such denials undermined America’s social contract and diminished fellow feeling among citizens (Egginton, 2018; Reeves, 2017). The recent lawful protests, rioting, looting, and vandalism in major cities further reveal the fragility of America’s social fabric. Crucially, such acts exposed the staggering harm that arises because of an inequitable and unjust society. Therefore, we must end racial discrimination not only because it is the morally right thing to do, but also because change is necessary if we are to become a more cohesive and thriving place, with equal justice for all. Moreover, in the United States, where there is so much misery, divisiveness, discord, and inequality, there is an important role for a consilience of pedagogy and renewal to play in creating social change.¹

A consilience of pedagogy and renewal should provide teachers, scholars, and students an opportunity to move “beyond business as usual” in the academy into a world of rich research and possibilities for change. A pedagogy of consilience and renewal is defined as a dynamic fusion of research projects and practices that should provide a coherent way of examining some of the keen variables that trouble the academy and society. The project centers on a robust attention to key aspects of American life and learning that should also help to transform the way we look at pedagogy for the betterment of North American society and beyond.

This imperative “call” challenges us to study five key scholarship of learning elements—a quintile—that are interlaced together like an exquisite coral. They include knowledge, geography, critical thinking, civic engagement, and empathy. Each one of the factors is deeply layered with social and cultural meaning, with an explicit and implicit condensation of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Deliberate attention to the quintile may also be viewed as a crucial way of understanding the immensurable compatibility of pedagogical ideas and practices, with knowledge occupying the hub and other points radiating outward like spokes in a wheel. Each spoke relies on the other for sturdiness and usefulness to civil society. Another virtue of using the consilience of pedagogy and renewal model is that scholars may bunch together other key, compatible, and useful values that organize human thought and behavior into understandable patterns in exciting ways.

Thus, inherent within the project is the idea that we recognize more fully the central importance of the quintile in the renewal of American pedagogy and civic culture. Of course, the list is not an exhaustive taxonomy. Rather, there are also other compelling elements that might be conjoined in the future, including technology, for example. However, at this stage of our intellectual inquiry, it behooves us to study the present quintile as we rethink our underlying assumptions about the impact of the scholarship of teaching and learning on student engagement, attitudes, and behavior. Furthermore, this approach allows us to test our students’ understanding of how the human mind is shaped by a fusion of knowledge and practice.

In the following sections, I outline why studying each factor should help facilitate a pedagogy of consilience and renewal in the United States and beyond. Because of time allotment, it is not possible to discuss the many complex, enmeshed “hows” that relate to the project. Significantly, a benefit of the model is that each class, professor, student, and citizen can craft his or her own way(s) of advancing a pedagogy of consilience and renewal.
**Knowledge**

In his engaging book *The Constitution of Knowledge*, Jonathan Rauch (2021) argues there is an “epistemic crisis” in America. The crisis stems from, among other things, our living in a world of disinformation, a loss of confidence in our elected officials and the news media, and tribal, clannish divisions between “us” versus “them,” all of which tamper with our “shared understanding that there are right and wrong ways to make knowledge” (p. 5). Why does this matter? It matters because, as Friedrich Hayek (1973) notes, “Civilization rests on the fact that we all benefit from knowledge we do not possess.” This signifies that a special kind of openness to new ideas and ways of thinking and being must obtain in diverse societies for human progress to occur. Otherwise, innovative solutions to human problems may be forestalled: solutions to climate change, ways of grappling with food deserts, water shortages, diseases, and germs, as well as a myriad of other scientific and humanitarian solutions “out there” just waiting to have their say and their sway (Norberg, 2020).

Some examples from the author’s repertoire about how we collectively benefit from contributions to society include the knowledge necessary for brilliant scientists to create vaccines for COVID-19 so we all can live whole and well again. Another example is the exquisite mathematical knowledge we gained from the sweet band of African American women who worked as human computers in the space industry to ensure successful launches into space. The work of their brilliant brains is memorialized in the movie, *Hidden Figures*. We are all heirs to their knowledge and the knowledge of countless others. The implication is that instructors and students should care about the role that substantive knowledge plays in persuading others in civil society, using argument as a commanding tool.

Cultivating in our students’ knowledge about knowledge construction and its uses should benefit society as a whole, with huge possibilities for renewal and excitement. Ben Sasse notes tellingly, “If we do not understand more fully how to discern truth from untruth,” we have a risk of getting to a place where we don’t have shared public facts” (qtd. in Rauch, 2021, p. 9). Research in these domains should not be ideologically driven, however. Rather, it should focus squarely on scholars and practitioners exploring what students know and understand about the constitution of knowledge during this moment of divisiveness. Cultivating this facet of the consilience quintile should pave the way for more creativity and human flourishing in North America. Research in this area should also help students understand more fully that the content of knowledge is the basis of argument and that knowing what, how, and why about knowledge construction just might facilitate more free inquiry, a basis for democratic practice.

**Geography**

In addition to promoting a pedagogy that enhances our understanding of common knowledge, it also behooves us to examine the interface between pedagogy and geography. Thirty years ago, in the small, agrarian town where this author grew up, there were basically two kinds of folk—teachers and preachers—and they lived side by side without geographical enclosures separating themselves from the have-nots. This aspect of the consilience of pedagogy and renewal model should help our students embrace common humanity by opening enclosures that keep some citizens locked out—away from access to knowledge and freedom. Using this component of the model, let us also envision studying the impact of geography on human knowledge and access to the good life in America.
As Egginton (2018) observes, “Where one lives, including public space and services, from streets to public education, is a natural outgrowth of one’s wealth, which in turn is a sign of self-worth, of effort, and of talent” (p. 146). Richard Reeves (2017) in Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class Is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What To Do About It, also weighs in on the relationship that obtains between where one lives and educational outcomes. He writes,

For the upper middle class, zoning and wealth reinforce each other in a virtuous cycle. Zoning ordinances, which began life as explicitly racist tools, have become important mechanisms for incorporating class divisions into urban physical geographies. This is not a partisan point. If anything, zoning is more exclusionary in liberal cities. (p. 103)

The following are some key questions that we might explore with our students: What is the role of geography in promoting or retarding human renewal? To what extent, if any, do bounded and particular areas increase structural inequalities? How does the logic of diversity work in zoned, restrictive areas? What can human beings gain from such knowledge that might be useful in embracing a consilience of pedagogy and renewal? As well, let us envision professors and students across a wide swathe of America engaged in such study, from rural Bernice, Louisiana, to urban Baltimore, Maryland.

Critical Thinking

This component of a pedagogy of consilience and renewal emphasizes critical thinking, the linchpin of an engaged, open, and flourishing society. But what is the nature of critical thinking today in elementary schools, high schools, and college? Rauch (2021) uses the term “critical persuasion” to advance the compelling point that students, teachers, and other citizens are “In the business of contending, persuading, compromising—like the dynamic, creative, option-expanding form of comprise which Madison envisioned for politics” (p. 93).

Have we lost a beautiful capacity for embracing cognitive freedom? Since ancient times Westerners have taken the power of thinking well seriously. In Rome and Greece, the ability to speak and to listen critically to others’ points of view, and to argue persuasively, were deemed most useful and necessary. Around 465 B.C., a change of government occurred in Syracuse, Sicily, when a tyrant was replaced by a democratic form of government. In the aftermath, conflicting disputes arose over claims to property. Who owned what land prior to the defeat of tyranny? Did the land belong to Stephanoulus or to Stanopolus? Answering these central questions made speaking effectively in ancient Greece a necessity. Thereafter, in Syracuse, Corax devised a “system of rules” for arranging and arguing legal disputes. The rules helped citizens arrange and rearrange their ideas to win their cases in court (Golden et al., 1976, p. 9; Smith, 1921). At this complex and various technological moment in history, how are our students faring in such regards? Is critical thinking imperiled in the academy? If yes, how can a pedagogy of consilience and renewal act as a balm for healing and for sustaining good citizenly business?

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is one of the bedrocks of American culture. In fact, while traveling in America in the 1830s, young Frenchman and social philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, commented on the nature of civic engagement in the country. If this interlaced pedagogy of consilience and renewal model works as envisioned, a component of civic engagement is necessary, because it interfaces with geography—a sense
of place and space—powerfully. As noted previously, currently geography—where one lives—separates different professional classes, ethnicities, races, faiths, incomes, and backgrounds from each other, and to a potential detriment to civil society. Such separations of soil sever opportunities for citizens to share good, quality conversations in communal spaces. Recall that in 18th- and 19th-century England, all manner and manor of Britons met in Public Houses—later shortened to Pub—while cultivating the art of conversation. Historically, civic engagement flourished when people across different classes came together pleasantly and participated in clubs and organizations. Recently, however, Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam (2000) revealed in his impressive book, Bowling Alone, that there has been a decline in citizenly participation in clubs, churches, and other forms of organizations.

Considering America’s declining involvement in civic events, which is in part due to the presence of social media, to what extent are students today connecting together in face-to-face interactions where “we are able to see, and touch, and smell, and hear each other . . . We’re social creatures. We are meant to be in connection with one another in a safe, caring way, and when it’s mediated by a screen, that’s absolutely not there,” as Hilarie Cash (Hari, 2018, p. 18), a psychotherapist who founded reSTART, reminds us. What kinds of thoughts and feelings are being sacrificed today because civic engagement is waning? Is the academy, under the auspices of a pedagogy of consilience and renewal, a great, good place for more thoughtful reflection on human values?

**Empathy**

The last vital component of the quintile of a consilience of pedagogy and renewal is empathy. We need to also add a program of empathetic literacy—a pedagogy of empathy—to increase our fellow feelings for one another. Empathetic literacy (a pedagogy of empathy) is

knowledge and information-based skills that help global citizens respond to and manage inter-cultural encounters caringly and competently. It focuses on skills that students and other citizens need to develop empathy, factors that influence empathetic competence, and approaches to improving empathetic effectiveness. (Calloway-Thomas, 2010, p. 214)

As Danielle Allen (2004) notes, “The ancient Greeks encouraged one another to be hospitable to strangers on the ground that any of them might turn out to be a god in costume” (p. 49). Gambians in West Africa also encourage citizens to be kind to strangers. In fact, one is obliged to do so on the grounds that reciprocity matters. Middle Eastern culture also abounds with such fidelity and courtesies. The point is we do not want our fellow citizens to become strangers. And what better way to encourage this than fostering empathy, which is the ability to “learn what it is like to live by someone else’s light” (Calloway-Thomas, 2010, p. 14).

Empathy is the moral glue that holds civil society together; unless humans have robust habits of mind and reciprocal behavior that lead to empathy, society as we know it will crumble. Humans are united by the powers and possibilities of empathy. As Tom Kitwood (qtd. in Vetlesen, 1994, p. 9) observes about why empathy matters:

our countless small and unreflective actions toward each other, and the patterns of living and relating which each human being gradually creates. It is here that we are systemically respected or discounted, accepted or rejected, enhanced or diminished in our personal being. (p. 149)
Conclusion

The project proposed here exhorts us to use a pedagogy of consilience and renewal as a potent way of addressing some keen variables that challenge our polarized society today in order to strengthen community. It argues for an emphasis on the common good, “the good we share in common.”

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Reeves, R. (2017). Dream hoarders: How the American upper middle class is leaving everyone else in the dust, why that is a problem and what to do about it. Brookings Institution.

Notes

2. Bell, T. & Calloway-Thomas discuss these concepts more fully in their forthcoming book, Speak Out, with SAGE.
The Pedagogy of Renewal: Black Women, Reclaiming Joy, and Self-Care as Praxis

Ashley R. Hall and Tiffany J. Bell

Keywords: self-care, renewal, embodied praxis, culturally relevant pedagogy, critical autoethnography, Black women, higher education

Abstract: The 2020 quote defining the pandemic era was “The New Normal,” which, for Black women, implies a need for structural and personal transformation. In this essay, we incorporate the concepts of culturally relevant pedagogy (Bell & Jackson, 2021) and critical autoethnography (Boylorn, 2020; Boylorn & Orbe, 2021) to amplify a Black feminist ethos of self-care as an embodied praxis. Reflecting on the embodied experiences of two Black women professors, we advance a crucial notion of self-care as a pedagogy of renewal to reclaim joy through generative and transformative modes, methods, and meanings.

Introduction

Racial battle exhaustion, ZOOM fatigue, and the COVID-19 pandemic created a new type of emotional trauma (Corbin et al., 2018; W. A. Smith, 2014). This is an emotional trauma layered with the material realities that continue to ravage Black communities, “disproportionately killing 97.9 out of every 100,000 African Americans” (Reyes, 2020, p. 300). Maritza Vasquez Reyes (2020) stresses this disproportionate impact on Black people as she reports that the “mortality rate is [a] third higher than that for Latinos (64.7 per 100,000), and more than double than that for whites (46.6 per 100,000) and Asians (40.4 per 100,000)” (p. 300). The 2020 quote defining the pandemic era was “The New Normal,” which implies a need for transformation. Given the ontological crisis facing Black people prior to the pandemic, a new normal—in an antiblack world—means more of the same old same old. We must reclaim, renew, and transform our minds, bodies, and spirits to combat existing and compounded emotional, mental, and physical trauma, stress, and anxiety.
Due to the structural nature and role of state-sponsored violence, trauma, and stress in our everyday lives amid a global pandemic, Black women and children remain vulnerable due, in part, to a lack of health insurance, quality health care access, and culturally competent health care professional care. “For Black women, in particular, a long-standing history of systemic racism and marginalization has increased vulnerability and susceptibility to certain adverse health outcomes” (Chandler et al., 2021, p. 80). The structural precarity Black women experience at the intersections of class, sexuality, ability, and nationality in the real-world streets is amplified and intensified by the devastating effects of COVID-19 on Black communities in the U.S. Pre-pandemic, Black women faculty experienced exhaustion, overextension, racial fatigue, and other issues negatively affecting our mental and physical health as well as our careers and productivity; the pandemic exacerbates existing issues of systemic inequity (Gray & Brooks, 2021; Mickey et al., 2020).

Black women academics have documented the unique struggles we face in our classrooms, during committee and department meetings, and just generally existing in academic institutional time and place (Baker-Bell, 2017; Davis, 2008; Houston & Davis, 2001; Perlow et al., 2018). The ongoing nature of antiblack violence speaks to the multidimensional forms of trauma Black women scholars are forced to navigate in relative silence with inconsistent institutional support. These conditions impact our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. “Black women say the pandemic has most negatively impacted their emotional well-being (64%) and mental health (63%), with 43% saying it has also negatively impacted their physical health” (Essence Magazine, 2020). The violent and toxic conditions shaping our daily lives require Black women faculty to unapologetically prioritize our wellness and healing so that we can embrace a more effective pedagogical practice. We argue that public discourse concerning higher education and pedagogy in the COVID-19 era often misses opportunities to apply intersectional lenses that account for the role of antiblack violence in Black women faculty’s lives. Critical communication pedagogy holds space particularly for Black women scholars to reimagine what care, support, and healing can look like for us amid and beyond structural precarity.

This essay focuses on our experiences as Black women professors at different Midwestern institutions in the U.S. to reflect on how our personal journeys inform our pedagogical practices as a self-care praxis. Black women’s communicative lives provide us opportunities to reimagine “The New Normal” in ways that account for the ongoing structural inequities impacting our embodied experiences and pedagogical philosophies, politics, and practices. Employing Black feminist theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, and critical autoethnography, we reflect on the trauma faced by two self-identified Black women from two different institutions that inform our self-care praxis as integral to pedagogies of renewal. As communication scholars, we often discuss the importance of context, power, and positionality, which is necessary to understand self-care as a collective enterprise and personal politics. We situate an understanding of self-care within Black feminist traditions as a self-reflexive process and resistive practice that supports the “holistic needs of Black communities” (Houseworth, 2021; Reetz, 2021).

Black feminist activists, intellectuals, and artists like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Stephanie Evans, Denise Taliaferro Baszille, Karla Scott, Salamishah Tillet, Lani Jones, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, to name a few, inform our conceptualization of pedagogy as self-care praxis. For example, as a Black lesbian mother, warrior, and poet Audre Lorde (1988) proclaims, “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p 125). In committing ourselves to take care of our minds, bodies, and spirits amid the persistence of antiblack violence, self-preservation remains intimately linked and “foundational to community building” (Burroughs as cited in Houseworth, 2021,
The embodied and spiritual ethos of self-care involves a commitment to Black liberation through health and wellness, **healing as community-oriented**, and storytelling as a source of our agentic power. In other words, “there is no self-care without community care” (Eromosele, 2020). The rich cultural heritage cultivated by Black feminist women concerning self-care as embodied, collaborative practice radically informs our investment in Black women’s liberatory pedagogies as self-care praxis.

During the initial 2 years of the pandemic, faculty scrambled to convert their face-to-face courses to online mediums and modalities while simultaneously strategizing how to best support students’ wellness and engagement. According to a survey conducted by a task force of the American Psychological Association (2022), one third of teachers reported having experienced at least one incident of verbal harassment or threat of violence from students during the pandemic, while 50% wanted to quit their jobs. Despite this reality, many institutional and public conversations concerning COVID-19 (and its impact on higher education) focused exclusively on students, leaving many educators unemployed, exhausted, and silenced. A social media Facebook (now Meta) page, Pandemic Pedagogy, was created in March 2020 for educators to share challenges, inquire about resources, and ask for advice and support. The discourse surrounding pandemic pedagogy, advanced primarily by white scholars on this page, remained hyper-focused on students with little to no regard for underrepresented faculty, particularly for BIPOC faculty at the intersections of multiple marginalized identities.

Social media public discussions frequently devolved into debates wherein those venting frustrations, particularly about students, ran the risk of being accused (in one way or another) of not caring about students’ well-being if they enforced boundaries considered contextually “taboo.” Of course, not all the threads were draining; some were informative and uplifting. Some focused on raising awareness regarding issues of accessibility, mental health, and wellness. However, good-intended dialogues often became toxic with one single post. Many conversations we saw turned into criticizing faculty for expressing their frustrations concerning student conduct and communication. Given our “new normal,” the chastisement of faculty experiences and feelings during the pandemic reproduces more of what “pandemic pedagogies” presumably “worked” to transform. The problem is that these public discussions consistently failed to account for the ways underrepresented communities were navigating prior to the pandemic. “Pandemic pedagogy,” as we understand it, remains rooted in white disciplinary regimes and registers of civility that produce more of the same old same old under the guise of equity and care.

BIPOC faculty narratives concerning existing inequities and compounded traumas are generative as they advocate for healthy boundaries between themselves and the institutions we serve and the students we teach. Our pedagogies of renewal pivot away from these discourses to center and prioritize ourselves (our well-being, health, and embodied experiences), amplifying the power of what Boylorn and Orbe (2021) refer to as “personal narrative as method” (p. 2). Black women scholars have addressed the importance of self-love, self-care, and the power of storytelling related to liberatory pedagogies (Davis, 1999; Evans et al., 2019; Perlow et al., 2018). We unapologetically uplift and amplify our voices through narrative/storytelling grounded in and animated through our intersectional lived experiences as Black women in academia. In centering and prioritizing ourselves as a self-care practice that promotes renewal, we afford our students models for learning that hold space for them to draw on their personal lived experiences to help them make sense of course content through embodied narratives.

Now, we briefly discuss Black feminist radical self-care as it relates to culturally relevant pedagogy and critical autoethnography to reflect on “renewal” as the self-care practices shaping our lives, communication strategies, and pedagogies.
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

“Culturally relevant pedagogy” (CRP), a concept coined in the early 1990s by Gloria Ladson-Billings, is based on the idea that students’ academic success too often comes at the expense of jettisoning a curriculum that aligns with students’ cultural worldviews, which in turn has the potential to impact students’ sense of cultural and psychosocial well-being adversely. Ladson-Billings (2021) defines CRP as “a pedagogy that empowers students . . . by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 4). As a result, a pedagogy that acknowledges and values the intersectional experiences of historically underrepresented students is warranted (Bell & Jackson, 2021; Hall, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Therefore, we incorporate the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (Bell & Jackson, 2021; hooks, 1994, 1999; J. Smith, 2020), expanding it to account for Black women faculty’s embodied experiences, experiences that influence how we negotiate our pedagogical practices in a pandemic era.

Barkley-Brown (1990) discusses the concept of polyrhythmic realities, in which both teachers and students shape the learning environment. Thus, the harmony between work—life balance and self-care become a critical component of nurturing an environment, and it is essential to acknowledge the interworking of this relationship. Radical self-care requires critical reflexivity to understand self-preservation as community-building practice. Reflexivity, as a process, looks at the self in relationships with others based on position, politics, and culture (Adams & Holman-Jones, 2011; Boylorn, 2020; Johnson, 2013). This process importantly requires us to deconstruct the self and requires us to ask ourselves to challenge questions about the amalgamation of language, movement, and materiality.

Critical Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a research method that involves researchers interrogating their personal experiences to analyze and make meaning of cultural experiences and phenomena (Ellis, 2004; Holman-Jones, 2005). We draw from culturally relevant pedagogical scholarship to underscore the importance of embodied experiences as epistemological resources that help us make sense of ourselves and the world around us. Boylorn and Orbe (2021) describe critical autoethnography as a method that “bridges critical social theory and storytelling” to emphasize the “emancipatory potential” of our narrative lived experiences (p. 4).

A primary guiding principle of critical autoethnography that informs our approach focuses on how one’s positionalities are situated and shaped by hegemonic power structures. These structures compel us to think critically about our experiences and how our lives inform our pedagogical practices in a pandemic era. Boylorn and Orbe state (2021),

> Our goal with this project was to produce a book that offered a range of personal/cultural experiences and perspectives, paying particular attention to the various intersections of identity that influence our daily lives, our understandings of self, and our relationships. (p. 3)

It is not a matter of simply telling one’s story but instead narrating one’s lived experience as embodied offerings containing critical meditations on how one might survive and thrive. How do Black women embody a pedagogy that prioritizes our lived experiences and amplifies students’ voices? The “teacher, scholar, professor’s” voice is surveilled and disciplined and thus discouraged from voicing our honest feelings about how institutional politics impact our health, wellness, and productivity. “Critical autoethnography is concerned with culture and power, and it is also concerned with constructions
and theorizations of cultural identities, intersectionality, and social inequalities” (Boylorn and Orbe, 2021 p. 6). CRP and critical autoethnography, when grounded in a Black feminist ethos of care, offer a unique approach to reflecting on our pedagogies as self-care praxis. While we do not identify explicitly as critical auto-ethnographers, this area of critical interpersonal and intercultural scholarship remains a valuable resource in situating ourselves and our voices in our pedagogical practices.

In the next section of this essay, we offer personal narratives that apply and embody tenets of culturally relevant pedagogies and critical autoethnography to generate space for Black women faculty to center self-care as a transformative pedagogical orientation.

**Tiffany J. Bell**

Before the pandemic and well before we moved online, I often heard: What are you? It was a question I often heard from students. The heart of the question makes me constantly think about the body politics associated with teaching as a Black (Bi-racial) woman who works as a professor at a small Liberal Arts Christian college in the Midwest. The paradox of this question is that we could or would never ask our students “that” question in such a public and insensitive way. However, the nature of these questions highlights the intersectional relationship between body politics and dynamics of power at work in the classroom. I am the object/subject of my student’s gaze, yet I need to claim my positional command as a professor. To deflect this “gaze,” I do what any good professor was taught, I ground myself in the research. However, this obsession with grounding myself in the research has led to unhealthy perfectionism. When I “mess up” in the classroom, I feel a bottomless pit in my stomach. I often mull over what I said or should have said in my lecture. I constantly battle fears of not being good enough and being judged for my thoughts.

This unhealthy relationship with perfectionism often results in “writer’s block” and intensifies my fears. The pandemic exacerbated this fear and lack of self-care. On April 8, 2021, I received a message on Facebook messenger that would forever change my perspective on life, self-care, and COVID-19. My friend from my first teaching job in Los Angeles died in this hospital from COVID-19. His death heightened my fears because the reality of death hit close to home. I was incessantly thinking about how we could die at any time and would often find myself crying because I felt we were in an apocalypse. Suddenly, my identity, my purpose, and my life were challenged. While negotiating my personal pains, I frequently visited the Pandemic Pedagogy Facebook page in hopes of improving my teaching. However, I found this platform to trigger my unhealthy relationship with perfectionism and demoralization. Many conversations dissed professors’ practices, citing educators needing to be more lenient with students and technology. Unfortunately, I was never afforded leniency as a teacher grappling with the death of a fellow friend and colleague in the academy.

The first thing I did to break the chains of unhealthy perfectionism was to reclaim the practice of self-care and self-love. Reclaiming your joy is first and foremost about centering your values. Your “values” are at the heart of good choices! So, whenever I start a task, I ask: What are my values? I value reciprocity, spirituality, and equity. Thus, I had to place my health at the center of my life. I wanted to reclaim the joy of embodied learning in ways that prioritize my health through spirituality. So, I had to reinvent myself and ground myself in spirituality. Spirituality is one of my primary values, but somehow it was missing from everyday life; thus, I needed to embrace renewal through “morning pages” and “meditation.” This spiritual method as practice facilitated my social and personal transformation. To critically reflect on
my relationship with unhealthy perfectionism, I enrolled in a meditation course and started seeing a therapist. As a result, I have managed and put things into perspective. I no longer let “small issues” or “people comments” infiltrate me deeply. Furthermore, writing this piece is an act of self-care and self-love.

I have learned to embrace the concept of “perfectly imperfect” which has transformed my self-care. These self-care practices have shifted my perspective and influenced how I speak of self-care as liberating with my students. I embody self-care as a liberatory pedagogy that offers students alternative models to reflect on the relationship between self and society. One way I embody these values in the classroom is by creating coursework that challenges the academy’s grand principles of inequity and meritocracy that leave little to no space for those whose marginalized identities do not fit into dominant narratives. The truth is that I do not need my body, my experience, and my values to fit neatly into these limited boxes. Instead, I bring my authentic self to work and incorporate my self-care values into pedagogy to provide students with space to embrace difference as generative. A question I ask myself is: How do I center myself in ways that organically collaborates with student voices and experiences? It is in bringing my values and an understanding of myself into the classroom that I am best positioned to assist students in identifying their own values. In helping them identify their values in connection to their positionalities, students can learn to think critically and develop new relationships with themselves and others through course material.

**Ashley R. Hall**

As a Black queer woman at a predominately white (PWI) public institution located in central Illinois, adapting, and adjusting to a professional career in academia has been rife with institutional, social, and personal challenges. During graduate school, I watched my white counterparts receive opportunities to work with white professors. In contrast, I received email communication containing website links to the university’s counseling center to work on what was perceived as an “attitude.” As a student, I witnessed firsthand how institutional violence ravages Black students, faculty, and staff with little to no consideration or recourse. Institutional and departmental politics often require us to sacrifice parts of ourselves to “play the game.” The game is rigged because I am damned if I do, damned if I don’t. Damned if I pop off and clap back, damned if I stay still and keep quiet. At some point in my program, I felt like the only way I was going to reach the finish line was if I left my own body, numbing myself to my pain. Post-PhD, I continued to struggle with the residual effects of graduate school as I navigated life as an assistant professor. Unsure about how to develop coping mechanisms to confront my anxiety, stress, and mental/emotional/spiritual trauma, feelings of inadequacy began to intensify which led to my fear that I could and would never “measure up.” From there, the name of the game became avoidance. As my self-care strategy—a strategy designed to reserve the hurt rather than confront the harm—avoidance allowed me to remain in denial about the trauma graduate school amplified. For a time, the strategy seemed to work. However, this reality was shattered in 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When classes moved online, campus communities (faculty, students, and staff) scrambled to determine how best to stay afloat amid panic, confusion, fear, and exhaustion from the pandemic. However, there was little to no discourse about the ongoing racial unrest impacting Black members of the campus community. The resounding institutional silence on antiblack racism, while Black Lives Matter uprisings took place all over the country, left me breathless, enraged, and overwhelmed. I thought to myself, “COVID-19 impacted everyone but antiblack violence does not?” As I processed my feelings and emotions (rage, grief, and sadness), student interactions left me constantly feeling like I was never doing
enough. Interactions and conversations with white colleagues made me resentful because there was little consideration of Black trauma, the focus instead seemed to focus on what we presumably all shared regarding the pandemic. As if antiblack violence only impacts Black people. So, when I heard the repeated phrase, “we are all going through a rough time,” I did not feel like there was a substantive accounting of the exhaustion and compounded trauma BIPOC faculty were experiencing. It never felt as if there was genuine public space for underrepresented faculty to vent our frustrations in earnest, understanding we were negotiating these same feelings prior to the pandemic. In online forums, I witnessed many folks ridiculed and shamed for being honest about their feelings and accused of not being sympathetic to students’ plight as if we were not already navigating our own.

Feeling frustrated and fed the fuck up, I began to push back against the idea that my pedagogy must center on students, choosing instead to prioritize and preserve myself first and foremost. My insistence on questioning, pushing back, and clapping back reminded me of the generative practice of feeling as an embodied pedagogical process. For me, a pedagogy of renewal entails honoring my feelings when student interactions and institutional politics deplete and trigger me. A pedagogy of renewal, a self-care praxis, encourages me to sit in and sort through the uncomfortable truths about how institutional violence impacts my life to reimagine possibilities beyond harm and trauma. A pedagogy of renewal, in antiblackness, requires me to be critically reflexive about how relations of power inform my pedagogical purview. The self-care praxis of feeling guides me, fills me, and empowers me as an advocate, a researcher, and a teacher. Self-care is not running from your feelings but rather confronting and harnessing them as conduits for healing and growth.

My feelings are a powerful resource integral to my survival and ability to thrive amid institutional violence and trauma. By incorporating therapy, art, and meditation into my daily life, I am learning what it feels like to establish mental and emotional boundaries that assist me in nurturing my feelings and preserving my spirit amidst the chaos. In committing myself to self-care (self-preservation over self-destruction) it has shifted how I approach the classroom as a site for personal transformation. As a pedagogical praxis, self-care frameworks provide students, particularly those belonging to underrepresented groups, space to prioritize their feelings as sites of embodied knowledge; feelings, as resources, can help them think critically about course content and themselves in relation to others in an antiblack world. I strive to foster brave spaces for students to sit in their discomfort to process their feelings and the material realities that inform them rather than allowing them to avoid (fear) challenging moments altogether. In working with students to unlearn feelings as counterproductive and avoidance as politically correct, students can begin to develop their own embodied liberatory practices grounded in an ethics of care.

### Future Directions

In this essay, we have reflected on the power of Black women’s embodied experiences and intersectional lenses as foundational in reimagining pedagogies of renewal as a self-care praxis. In closing, we propose one possible activity, the “Contract” assignment, that incorporates our pedagogies of renewal in our courses. This activity invokes the power of student stories focused on themes of meditation, self-care practices, and narrative healing. This assignment requires students to think critically as they reflect on the relationship between self and culture, power, and critical thinking in an antiblack world. In sharing their experiences through narrative, students are exposed to different realities and perspectives designed to help them deconstruct and reconstruct an understanding of the self as a self-care praxis. Ultimately, pedagogies of renewal, informed by Black women faculty’s intersectional experiences, hold space for
students to explore the relationship between course content and its application to their lives, in and outside of the classroom.

**References**


“The Contract” Assignment

Rationale: Racial battle fatigue and COVID-19 have significantly impacted campus communities, particularly in the classroom for teachers and students. The relational dynamic between students and faculty has become even more transactional and less personal amid the pandemic and civil unrest. As written and/or spoken agreements, contracts are fundamentally about relationships communicating a particular set of values or beliefs. The central objective of this assignment is for students to identify and reflect on the relationship between self, society, power, and learning. To complete this assignment, students draft a contract that expresses and embodies their values in relation to the content of the course.

The assignment involves both an oral and written component for students to critically reflect and deconstruct their positionality within the context of the classroom in an antiblack capitalist world. This assignment allows students to place their narrative at the center of learning while cultivating what Barkley-Brown (1990) calls polyrhythmic realities that both teacher and student shape the learning environment.
Preparation

To prepare for the class assignment, the instructor should become acquainted with Gloria Ladson-Billings’s (2021) culturally relevant pedagogy, which describes the importance of placing the student at the center of learning. In addition, we suggest reading The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) and Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning (2014) to introduce students to cultural misconceptions about learning as an embodied praxis as it relates to questions of communication, power, and self-reflexivity. This is important because students need to be exposed to diverse perspectives, realities, and experiences to develop their ability to communicate and collaborate across differences.

Day One

Step 1

The instructor reviews the syllabus and the course’s learning objectives with students to establish expectations and provide parameters for class discussion. Day One has four objectives.

1. Review the class learning objectives. Discuss how these objectives could align with students’ professional and personal goals and values
2. Facilitate an in-class discussion that allows students to think about how these learning objectives align with their personal or professional goals. Students need to offer concrete examples to support their observations.
3. Allow students at least 5–10 minutes to think about these questions and their relationship to this course using prompted questions. Then, ask students to review the syllabus and write a short paragraph answering the sample questions.
   a) Sample Prompts:
      (i) Why are these learning objectives critical to my success?
      (ii) What are my values? Why and how are they important in this contract?
      (iii) What goals do I have for this course?
      (iv) When I feel stressed, what can I do to manage my responsibilities?
      (v) How will I accomplish these learning objectives? (example: through readings or different assignments)
      (vi) How do you apply what you learn in this course to your everyday life?

4. After allowing students to think critically about their contracts/learning objectives, facilitate a conversation that will enable students to apply assigned readings to help students think critically answering the questions using personal narratives. Conclude the class discussion by considering how listening to their classmates’ stories improves their ability to develop empathy for themselves, their peers, and their instructor.
Homework (In Preparation for Day Two)

In-Class Written Assignment (1–2 pages). Contracts must address the following:

- Learning Objectives (remember, should align with course objective)
- How will your values impact your objectives?
- How will you accomplish these learning objectives through readings, different assignments, and so forth?
- What is your overall personal/professional goal for the semester?
- How do you work when you are at your best? How can this schedule help accomplish your “best self”?
- Detailed schedule (Outlining study schedule to complete coursework)
- How many hours will you spend on each assignment? Example (reading, watching videos, or writing)

Day Two

Step 2

This class period is designated for students to meet with their instructor to review their contracts.

Day Three

Step 3

The third day extends the discussion by allowing students to reflect on and share their written responses, first in small groups and then in a larger class discussion. During the class discussion, students reflect on the process of creating a contract as a self-care practice (that is, as a way for students to center their lived experiences as a frame to grapple with course content). To conclude Day Three, students should write a final brief reflection that discusses what they have learned from completing this assignment.
Heading for the Future After COVID-19: Reflections and Recommendations on Teaching Processes in a Rapidly Changing Learning Landscape

Wanda Reyes-Velázquez and Carmen Pacheco-Sepúlveda

Keywords: remote teaching, face-to-face in person teaching, flipped classroom, technologies for teaching

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic posed numerous challenges for instructors and students. Professors, for example, struggled to quickly and effectively migrate face-to-face courses to remote teaching modalities. What had not been anticipated, however, were the additional challenges to be managed when returning to face-to-face and in-person teaching. This reflective essay provides some insight into how faculty at the University of Puerto Rico attempted to modify teaching practices to re-engage disengaged students as they returned to the campus classroom. Also, recommendations about how to move forward by applying a pedagogy of renewal are made.

Introduction

In terms of teaching with technology, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the future to many academic institutions overnight. This was most certainly true at our institution in Puerto Rico. Many faculty members were abruptly thrust into an unknown reality. We went from teaching face-to-face in-person courses to teaching remotely in some combination of synchronous and asynchronous modalities. While technology had been used to assist teaching in our face-to-face courses, migrating them to different modalities posed challenges to professors and students. Moreover, some of us thought that we would be forced to teach remotely as a stopgap until the end of the semester. We had not even fathomed that it would take almost 2 years to go back to teaching face-to-face in-person courses!
The process of returning to the classroom after sitting in front of a computer for 2 years has turned out to be highly stressful and exhausting for faculty members and students. For instance, I (Wanda) was assigned the same courses that I had been teaching prior to the COVID-19 lockdown. Like most of my colleagues, I prepared to teach using the same methods I used before the COVID-19 lockdown. However, to my confusion, those teaching methods no longer worked at all.

At the beginning of the semester, I prepared lessons, arrived in the classroom, and started teaching just to realize that I had to change the lesson plan right there because students did not do the homework or the readings. Or, if they did do the homework, it was incomplete and full of mistakes. The classroom environment had changed, as well. I had to compete with students having side conversations during class and leaving the classroom to take phone calls. Absenteeism was high because students were either taking time off to go on vacation, to pick up additional shifts at work, and to attend doctors’ appointments. In my frustration, I ultimately decided to retire. My request was denied because: “You neither have the age nor the time accrued to retire.” As a last resort, I did the only thing I could think of doing. I decided to ask students how they were coping with the return to the classroom.

What I learned was that students had changed. Many of these full-time students also got full-time jobs or multiple jobs during the lockdown. Therefore, finding time to do groupwork—which was challenging prior to the lockdown—was now nearly impossible. Some students were also dealing with anxiety and other mental health issues because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students made vacation plans while on lockdown that they still wanted to take even after returning to face-to-face courses. Classroom management was difficult as many students had become accustomed to doing class in front of a computer. In addition, cognitively speaking, critical thinking skills were clearly lacking after 2 years of remote learning. Students were only able to describe concepts at the recall level.

To adapt my courses to reach these disengaged students and promote their intellectual growth in a rapidly changing landscape of teaching and learning, I started a journey of pedagogical renewal. This pedagogy has, according to Nava García (2020), “the aim of promoting a change in the way of teaching and promoting an active learning model, in contrast to the traditional education,” which is characterized by a content-based teaching process, where students are passive actors, whose purpose was acquiring knowledge from a learning process based on repetition-memorization.

My pedagogical renewal journey began by attending webinars about teaching practices hosted by Dr. Carmen Pacheco-Sepúlveda, Director of the Academic Excellence Center on campus. Then, she hosted meetings with faculty members, so we all could try to make sense of what was happening in our classrooms. In discussing shared challenges, we were able to identify opportunities to address them. I learned that we can only maximize those opportunities through a pedagogy of renewal, by identifying where we were before COVID-19 and where we are now, to determine how to move forward. These conversations and the information that I gathered from students led me to modify my pedagogical approach in the classroom.

**Pedagogy of Renewal**

To engage students in this changing landscape of higher education, I now place the focus solely on them. They must be responsible for their learning. I flipped the classroom and now use an online learning platform where students have access to narrated presentations, readings, and quizzes to identify if they
recognize the concepts discussed in the lesson. That affords me the opportunity to work on enriching comprehension in the classroom. As part of this pedagogy, I integrated numerous exercises designed to learn by doing—a learning structure based on goal-based scenarios in which students pursue a goal by practicing target skills and using relevant content knowledge (Schank et al., 1999). Of course, these pedagogies were available before the pandemic; however, using them has become essential to engage students since then. I rely on a pedagogy of renewal that “involves learning new skills and knowledge, understanding how new knowledge is linked to practice, and recognizing how underlying beliefs influence the selection, enactment, and reflection of pedagogical approaches” (Di Biase et al., 2021).

Although it was a best practice in the past, today we must identify students’ profiles so we can create content that is relevant to them and their lived experiences. To do so, we need to answer the following questions: Why are they registered in the academic program? What do they expect from faculty? What are their professional expectations? If they work, how many hours a week do they work? What is their technological literacy? What technological devices do they own? Do they have to share those devices? Do they have access to the internet? Do they speak English as a second language? What is their ethnic background and what academic experiences have they had? What are their learning styles? What are their cognitive skills? How motivated are they to take a course and what motivates them to take it?

In addition to learning students’ profiles and adapting our pedagogies to meet them where they are at, we must also examine and adapt our pedagogies to address the new professions and workplace practices that have emerged because of the lockdown. Academic programs should stay in touch with professional organizations to identify how professions have been evolving during the COVID-19 pandemic. We need to develop a new curriculum that considers new students’ profiles and how professions are evolving.

Because teamwork remains one of the key elements to workplace success, we need to adapt group work pedagogies that allow students to succeed in the world they live in today. One way might be to design exercises or projects that integrate different courses. The same large group project could produce unique deliverables for different courses. For example, an advertising campaign course could be integrated with graphic design and TV or sound production courses on a project. Students enrolled in the advertising course should be able to interact with others who are preparing themselves in different fields. They should all work together on the same project and then reflect on what it means to develop a project from diverse perspectives and identify the benefits and challenges of working with people from different fields.

A pedagogy of renewal must be grounded in ongoing formal and informal assessment (Bennett, 2017). Students and teachers are navigating uncharted territory. Hence, formal assessment is still important, but conducting informal assessments each time class meets is just as—if not more—critical. For example, I start class by asking how students are doing academically in general and identifying what might hinder their learning on that day. This helps me identify situations that could be competing with their attention and adapt accordingly. Also, I offer online forums for students to ask questions that may arise while they are watching narrated presentations or doing the readings before attending class. Then I have them work complete pre-class exercises that show me what they understand and what we ought to focus on for further clarification during face-to-face in-person class time. I am also considering a digital portfolio assignment for each class I teach and, perhaps, for students to keep developing throughout their journey through the program. Adopting this flipped-classroom pedagogy and conducting constant informal assessments are an example of a pedagogy of renewal I am enacting to engage my post-pandemic
disengaged students. My pedagogical renewal journey has been informed greatly by Dr. Pacheco-Sepúlveda's advice. She provides recommendations from her experience in the next section.

**Recommendations From the Academic Excellence Center Director**

I became the director of the Academic Excellence Center in August 2020. At the center, we help professors improve teaching and learning on campus. Like most centers at other universities, we offer workshops and webinars throughout the year. However, during the COVID-19 lockdown, attendance at webinars increased 89% as faculty members were migrating their courses to teach remotely. Now that our university is offering face-to-face courses again, I noticed the struggle that faculty members have endured as they return to classrooms because there has been a transformation in the learner profile. Therefore, as a collective, we must look for ways to better educate these post-pandemic students in a constantly changing teaching landscape.

The COVID-19 lockdown “obstructed the entire education system,” leading universities and faculty members to utilize more technologies that facilitate e-learning in their classrooms (Kalaichelvi & Sankar, 2021). Since so much work was done at a societal level on computer platforms and apps, new ways of getting the work done were available. Education can benefit from this scenario by incorporating more technologies into the teaching processes. However, I recommend that we concentrate on how we will create a safe environment in our face-to-face classrooms as we adopt technologies in our teaching. With the use of more technology, we should produce practices that: (1) provide equitable instruction and engage all students; (2) provide support for students with unique learning needs; (3) meet students’ socio-emotional needs; (4) address the digital divide for families and educators; and (5) adopt anti-racist policies and practices (The Education Trust, NY, 2020).

Educational processes have been impacted significantly since March 2020, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shared guidelines for alternative teaching methods (Kalaichelvi & Sankar, 2021). The transformation of face-to-face courses to virtual ones created challenges, but also brought opportunities for the education discipline. Now that we are returning to classrooms, there is a need to develop new pedagogies, teaching methods or theories of education adapted to the teaching and learning situations experienced during the pandemic, new student generations, and globalization. As we used diverse technologies to teach during the lockdown, moving forward we should consider its impact on education and the development of individuals or digital citizens that can collaborate with others at local and global levels. Thus, Hardman’s proposal (2021) on the internationalization of education in the 21st century makes us consider promoting collaborative learning as a dialogical method for developing citizens with digital skills who can become globalized citizens. He proposes to motivate human relationships in educational environments to acquire shared knowledge through these interactions, produced through the cognitive-rational process.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to use new technologies for teaching. Nonetheless, to create safer learning environments, as we integrate more technologies in the classroom, we must continue strengthening security in learning management platforms and applications that enable communication among students and professors. Hence, digital literacy should be developed among students and faculty so we can protect devices, digital content as well as data, and keep our privacy in virtual environments. In addition, digital citizenship education, which entails creating a responsible use of technologies (Buchholz et al., 2020), can be achieved not only through new teaching practices that incorporate technology, but
also with the same learning principles that apply for digital citizenship education (Biseth et al., 2021). The latter form of education concentrates on using technologies responsibly. Furthermore, since we create digital footprints as we communicate online, we must pay attention to the physical and psychological impact that they make on us as individuals. We must also ask ourselves; how do we promote effective digital citizenship among people who have different thoughts or worldviews?

The safe spaces that we create to manage technology must also provide a safe environment for human interactions that allow promoting diversity of thoughts and the inclusion of people from different social groups and cultures. The safety of human interactions can be developed based on the students’ profiles that we identify. Thus, as we move forward, it is important to develop intercultural intelligence—“the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affects, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world” (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 7)—in face-to-face courses that include virtual components since learners or digital citizens are exposed nowadays to more information online. When we integrate face-to-face courses with virtuality, we must also understand how learners behave as digital citizens in the cyberspace, so that discrimination or stereotypes are not perpetuated in educational activities that are carried out in the virtual world.

**Final Thoughts**

To conclude, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many changes to our classrooms and teaching practices. Professors have worked tirelessly, and we already have made a difference. But we believe that, as we move forward, we should also take a moment to acknowledge and congratulate ourselves because we have experienced unthinkable challenges. We demonstrated our resilience. We are now showing our resolve for renewal. The future is there for us; we shall succeed.

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Practicing Critical Thinking Skills
Within a Pedagogy of Renewal

Edward A. Hinck

Keywords: debate, student engagement, discussion boards

Abstract: The COVID-19 “pivot” created challenges for instructors in adapting their teaching strategies to the various forms of technology available for virtual delivery. One positive outcome discovered for teaching an introduction to debate class was the use of Blackboard’s discussion board feature to assess student learning regarding understanding and application of concepts of evidence and reasoning for an introduction to debate class. This essay provides an account of how I adapted my teaching strategies, the assignment for student participation created to assess student learning, and positive outcomes for students needing time to process arguments and respond in a virtual forum.

Introduction

What was gained and lost in the pivot from face-to-face class discussion to virtual class discussion in an introduction to debate course? To answer this question in a positive way, I discuss what made taking an introductory debate class difficult for some students before the pandemic, how using the discussion board feature in the Blackboard learning management system became necessary to maintain student engagement, and what I discovered as relevant and effective uses for the discussion board in place of traditional classroom question and discussion practice I utilized before March 2020.

Taking an introductory debate course without prior debate experience can seem daunting for some students. Many years ago, a position paper I authored for a developmental conference on forensics, quoted by James McBath (1984), described the complex cognitive scaling involved in developing proficiency in advocacy:

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Creating an argument is the most complex cognitive act a student can engage in. To create an argument, students are required to research issues (which requires knowledge of how to use the library), organize data, analyze the date, synthesize different kinds of data, and evaluate information with respect to the quality of conclusions it may point to. To form an argument after researching, organizing, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating, students must understand how to reason, must be able to recognize and critique different methods of reasoning, and must have an understanding of argumentation theory—the logic of decision making. The successful communication of arguments to audiences reflects another cognitive skill—the ability to communicate complex ideas with words. Finally, the argumentative interaction of students in a debate reflects an even more complex ability—the ability to process the arguments of others relatively quickly and to reformulate and adapt or defend previous positions. (pp. 8–9)

Students are not only trying to develop their cognitive understanding of abstract reasoning processes but deal with the affective and behavioral dimensions of advocacy in a 16-week class among other courses and social pressures. Although it might be possible to break all (or most) of the skills involved in advocacy down into discrete cognitive or communication practices, doing so might intimate students even more. The pivot during the pandemic forced me to think about what could be done (or tried) to cultivate the practice of discrete critical thinking skills.

I discovered that the virtual class discussion board feature in the Blackboard learning management system facilitated formative assessment of learning regarding recognition of types of evidence and reasoning. Prior to the pivot, I used post-debate discussions as opportunities for me to see how students formed an understanding of how different types of evidence and reasoning were used in the debates. However, class discussions assume ideal circumstances of student engagement. Post-debate discussions of argument strategies assume students understand strengths and weaknesses of logical, ethical, and rhetorical strategies, and can comment on those strategies in the immediate aftermath of listening to a debate in class. Some students might choose to remain silent or let other students lead the way. Some students are introverted, self-conscious, lacking in confidence, monitoring cell phones, or distracted by other interests. Transactionally, if there are no points assigned to participating in the discussion, and no clear example of what counts as an adequate response to the invitation to discuss argument strategies after a debate, students might forego participating in discussion. Despite my encouragement and gentle prompting to contribute, post-debate discussions have constituted inconsistent episodes of learning; lively on some days, challenging on others.

At the time of the pivot, I had no experience in working with virtual meeting platforms like Zoom, Webex, or Microsoft Teams. Prior to the lockdown, I could not imagine a future where having this knowledge would be essential to delivering courses I taught to this point in my career. In the short time I had to transition to online learning, gaining training in a new technology seemed overwhelming; although in retrospect, learning how to use virtual platforms, now required of me, seems manageable. I chose to utilize Blackboard’s discussion board feature to present the texts of speeches by students and to facilitate discussion of the arguments made by the students in their speeches. While not ideal for the experience of debating with the possibility of imminent response, nor for the limitations imposed on discussion immediately after the debate, the decision yielded an opportunity to assess student learning in ways I had not considered before the pandemic. In this respect, the shift required my students and
I to try something different in the way we approached learning about types of evidence and tests of reasoning.

My version of “introduction to debate” is organized in two parts. The first half of the semester covers material from the textbook using lecture and group activities to gain knowledge and practice applying concepts. The second half of the semester is devoted to debates held in class. Topics are announced 72 hours in advance. Students are paired into teams and encouraged to research issues in the news prior to the debate to develop arguments. The second half of the semester asks students to develop behavioral knowledge in the role of advocates and judges. Students not assigned to debate or judge are encouraged to take notes in each debate and expected to discuss the argument strategies with the small amount of time remaining after class.

Shifting from a face-to-face teaching format to a virtual asynchronous format allowed me to create an expectation for participation for each student not assigned the roles of debater or judge while also overcoming obstacles to students contributing in the immediate aftermath of the debate. Students had time to process the debate, could re-read the speeches to search for examples, did not need to struggle to remember what was argued, or need to consult notes of debates made with limited practice, and could contribute without fear of immediate evaluation on the part of classmates (Brookfield, 2006, see Chapter 11). What I gave up through the more spontaneous, immediate response of a debate face-to-face helped me gain a greater degree of learning through making the debate accessible as a text in extended time, available for study. Prior to the pandemic I had believed that students would find the discussion after the debates useful as opportunities to apply concepts of evidence and reasoning, and for some students, an opportunity to discuss argument strategies. While I would try to draw out students who seemed satisfied to let others comment, some students found it difficult to contribute to a discussion immediately after the debate.

What is difficult about learning different types of reasoning and evidence? First, students need to be able to remember, identify, and recognize, and then be able to distinguish between different types of evidence and reasoning. As I note below, these skills require practice. Second, once these skills are developed, students can begin to make choices about what kinds of reasoning and support materials to use in creating arguments. Different types of support for claims have strengths and weaknesses. For example, statistics are powerful ways of talking about the extent of a problem but less engaging as support than a vivid example; examples, while appealing to the psychological understanding of an issue can be limited in persuasive value since an example illustrates only one instance (Campbell et al., 2015, see Chapter 4). Third, weighing evidence and reasoning for potential persuasive value in relation to one’s audience reflects Bloom’s higher skills of evaluating support materials used in creating arguments. Although an introductory class limits progress on this learning outcome, unless memory and application skills are in place, the possibility of creativity seems unlikely. Fourth, the promise of developing this skill depends on students having the opportunity to practice the critical thinking skill of recognizing different types of support materials, and then evaluating them as a higher order skill. Greater practice in evaluating support materials contributes to developing skills in analyzing the potential persuasive and strategic value of support materials. For instructors of introductory debate courses, the design issue is twofold: (1) how to create opportunities for practice and (2) how to create accountability on the part of students to practice?
Three types of debate propositions were covered in class: fact, value, and policy. Students were informed that debate propositions would be provided by the instructor and drawn from news articles in recent issues of the New York Times. Debate propositions were posted in Blackboard's "Announcement" feature for the entire class to see. Students scheduled to participate in a class session's debate were given “url’s” of news articles as prompts when debate propositions were announced. Debate teams were composed of two students each; three students served as judges of the debate and were required to complete ballots assigning speaker ranks from 1–4 and speaker points on a five-point scale for six advocacy skills (evidence, delivery, organization, reasoning, analysis, and refutation) and provide a rationale for the decision. All other students not debating or judging were assigned to participate in a class discussion via Blackboard's discussion board feature. Students' names were listed for each role to indicate who was debating, who was judging, and who was “attending” and assigned to identify effective examples of reasoning and evidence use. To ensure that both the affirmative and negative team’s arguments were discussed, half of the students “attending” as audience members were assigned to comment on the affirmative’s arguments and half were assigned to comment on the negative’s arguments.

Two student learning outcomes (SLO) were pursued in the assignment: (1) Identify types of evidence by correctly matching a type of evidence with an example to illustrate that type of evidence from one of the speeches posted in the discussion forum. (2) Identify forms of reasoning by correctly matching a type of reasoning with an example from one of the speeches posted in the discussion forum. These SLOs were based on Bloom’s original (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) taxonomy of learning: understanding—students were asked to recognize, identify, and explain accurately types of evidence and reasoning in the debate speeches posted to the discussion board; and application—since each debate was over a different issue from the news students had to interpret examples of language use in new situations. Each debate was a new opportunity for students to convey their understanding of examples of evidence and reasoning. The assignment did not require students to remember the list of types of evidence and reasoning since they were listed in the prompt for the discussion board assignment. However, if students could not remember definitions of types of evidence or reasoning, they could review their text (Rybacki & Rybacki, 2012) or notes. Nor did the assignment require them to justify their choice of “best” or “effective” use of evidence or reasoning in comparison to other examples used. The two kinds of learning from Bloom’s taxonomy would be understanding and application, appropriate for an introductory course in debate.

More importantly, I developed examples of contributions to the discussion board that contained the qualities of understanding and application that I was envisioning for the assignment. As noted below, the examples name the types of evidence and reasoning claimed to be effective, refer to the example of evidence and reasoning by quoting or paraphrasing from the speech transcript posted in the discussion forum, and provide a minimal explanation of why the evidence or reasoning was effective. The examples set a standard for a contribution that would reveal the accuracy of a student’s memory of the concept used, comprehension of the concept applied, and cultivate practice in the application of the concepts so that the student’s understanding could build the “muscle memory” of cognition involved in understanding reasoning processes at the unit of individual argument forms in support of stock issues. Last, I did a word count so that the student could get a sense of the length of the posting needed to address the content expectations qualitatively and quantitatively. If the student desired to gain points for attending class, despite the transactional nature of the assignment, posting in response to this assignment allowed me to read and evaluate the accuracy of the student’s understanding and application of the concepts. The discussion feature in Blackboard allowed me to give feedback for each class session so that a student who desired to improve understanding of the concepts could do so with each posting. Below, I have presented
the detailed prompt posted on Blackboard in the “Announcement” field so that every student was sent the information for the class session’s debate. The assignment and examples of how I hoped students would respond is provided below.

**Assignment for Attendance and Participation**

Please read the debate speeches posted in the Blackboard Discussion Board for the debate on the assigned date. After reading the speeches, identify the strongest example of reasoning and piece of evidence for the side you are assigned to comment on. Types of reasoning and evidence are listed below: Post your response to this prompt on the Discussion Board for the date listed for the debate.

Your posting should be no fewer than 100 words and no more than 150 words. Your posting should identify an example of *one kind of reasoning* and *one kind of evidence supporting a claim*.

You need to identify the type of reasoning and quote or paraphrase from the debate the example of that type of reasoning being used.

You need to identify the type of evidence and quote or paraphrase from the debate the example of that type of evidence being used.

Types of reasoning and types of evidence are identified below. If you cannot remember the definition/description of these types, you should review your notes and/or relevant chapters from the textbook.

**Types of Reasoning**

Parallel case? Analogy? Generalization from one or some to more? Classification?

Division? Reasoning from sign? Cause and effect?

**Types of Evidence**


**Examples of Postings for Attendance and Participation**

The best example of reasoning for the Aff/Gov team was the argument regarding *cause and effect* of pollution. The Aff/Gov team relied on cause and effect reasoning to show that lead poisoning would occur from chemical runoff of mining operations under the Trump administration’s new rules. The best example of evidence used was *testimony* provided by a former Environmental Protection Agency administrator under the Obama administration. The former administrator said that in his judgment, the lead runoff from mining operations would threaten the health of people downstream. Because he has served as an administrator in the EPA and because employment in the EPA requires expertise and experience, this was an effective use of support. (114 words)
The best example of reasoning from the Neg/Opp was an argument based on the form of reasoning known as classification. The Neg/Opp argued that there were two legal frameworks involved, federal and state level. They argued that not all states should be classified as in need of protection from water pollution. Further, they argued that if a state’s governor or state legislature thought that more stringent protection was needed than that provided by the Trump administration’s new rules, they could pass such a law. The strongest piece of evidence they provided came from a member of the Trump administration who offered this distinction as a legal fact. Since this was not a case where the Trump administrator relied on expertise to interpret other facts, it was less an example of expert testimony and more an example of a fact in describing the relationship between state and federal levels of governance. (150 words)

References
Coming to Terms Will Do It: Students Engaging With Climate Change Through Sensemaking and Collective Efficacy Perceptions

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Keywords: climate change communication, fear appeals, coming to terms, instructional communication, crisis communication

Abstract: Within climate change instruction, effective instructional crisis communication is necessary to attain cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning outcomes so students comprehensively learn the reality and implications of this planetary crisis. I locate this learning as coming to terms with climate change. This study explores how students affectively and cognitively learned to come to terms with the immense threat of the climate crisis outside their initial exposure to climate change fear appeals communicated in their classrooms. Drawing from interviews and focus groups with college students, I found students came to terms with climate change outside their classrooms by coping with the immense threat while enacting sensemaking with their peers. These findings suggest coping and sensemaking are crucial for students to come to terms with climate change after instructor-delivered fear appeals to access the efficacy needed to face this planetary threat. Ultimately, this study advances instructional crisis communication by providing insight into student to student out-of-classroom communication and how it affects cognitive and affective learning outcomes concerning climate change.

Introduction

“To survive climate change, animals must either migrate, adapt, evolve, or die.” An image on the projector screen accompanies this assertion, depicting a ravenous polar bear scrabbling with a seagull on a landscape devoid of ice or snow. The wildlife biology professor grimly eyes the 70 students before him, letting the moment's impact sink in for before dismissing the class. I pull my gaze from the unnerving image and examine the students leaving the classroom. Most seem to be visibly shaken by the frightening lecture; some woodenly gather their belongings while others stare blankly as they process...
the lecture’s implications. I shift my scrutiny to the professor and think, “Why did he make his lecture so fearful?” Interestingly, I notice his dour expression soften to one of satisfaction and I follow his gaze to the students exiting the room. Most are leaving in clusters, talking to each other in hushed tones. I ask myself, did the professor use fearful communication knowing the students would discuss it afterward? If so, what could be gained by the students talking about the lecture among themselves, outside of the classroom? I look to the professor and wonder, “What does he know that I don’t?”

Instructors have an exigent duty to communicate honestly to students about the reality of the climate crisis and the emergent risks that may well prove catastrophic. Yet, even in the mildest instruction, as Reser and Bradley (2017) caution, all climate change communication contain “inherently, frightening warning messages, quite apart from any intentional fear appeals” (p. 1). Whether or not instructors teaching about climate change are deliberately employing fear appeals, the subject matter carries dire implications for the well-being of life on our planet. Moreover, although instructors use fear appeals with good intentions, “dramatic, sensational, fearful, shocking, and other climate change representations” tend to result in people “feeling helpless and overwhelmed when they try to comprehend their own relationship with the issue” (O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009, p. 375). Nevertheless, climate change instructors must cultivate “in young people an integrated understanding of the many aspects of the climate issue, hopeful visions for the future and a conviction that it lies in their power to shape the future” (Schreiner et al., 2005, p. 43). I approach this cultivation as coming to terms with climate change (Reser & Bradley, 2017), where students learn comprehensively (affective, cognitive, and behavioral) about the “reality and implications of climate change” (Reser & Bradley, 2017, p. 24) to meaningfully engage with the crisis.

Essentially, I argue that effective instructional crisis communication focused on attaining cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning outcomes will help students come to terms with climate change and their role in addressing it. As T. L. Sellnow et al. (2012) contend, instructional communication should extend into crisis situations, as effective instructional messages are critical to achieving appropriate crisis responses. Yet, instructional crisis communication on climate change may be constrained by the crisis’s confounding qualities. For many students, climate change is spatially and temporally overwhelming (Verlie, 2019), as well as invisible (Schreiner et al., 2005). In addition, potential impacts of personal contributions seem insignificant and controversies over moral, ethical, and political dimensions are immense (Owens et al., 2017). Consequently, students may (a) struggle as they attempt to accurately understand the vastly scaled subject matter (cognitive), (b) believe they cannot engage in the actions necessary to influence positive change (affective), and (c) lack the skills needed to engage in their own climate change communication (behavioral). However, effective instructional crisis communication may surmount these obstacles by focusing specifically on strategic messages that achieve these learning outcomes and, consequently, help students come to terms with climate change.

This study explores how students learn to come to terms with climate change outside the classroom after instructor-delivered fear appeals. As D. D. Sellnow et al. (2015) argue, if a primary outcome of instructional communication is to foster learning (affect, cognitive, behavioral), then it undeniably occurs in many contexts beyond traditional classrooms (p. 427). I particularly focus on how students conduct this out-of-class communication (Myers, 2017)—yet, not with their instructors, but instead

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1. A fear appeal is a “persuasive communication attempting to arouse fear in order to promote precautionary motivation and self-protective action” (Ruiter et al., 2001, p. 614). See Reser and Bradley (2017) for a review on climate change fear appeals.
amongst their class peers. More specifically, I contend that understanding how students come to terms with climate change by communicating with their peers outside the classroom may inform instructional crisis communication practices within the classroom. Additionally, while very little research exists specific to climate change fear appeals used in classroom settings, broader studies that do exist tend to focus on the participant's initial exposure to a fearful message and its immediate effectiveness (Chen, 2016; Feldman & Hart, 2016; Li & Huang, 2020; Skurka et al., 2018). To date, we know less about how people come to terms with climate change days, weeks, or months after experiencing these fear appeals; particularly when these fearful climate change messages are introduced in the classroom. Thus, I am concerned with how students come to terms with climate change when they engage in the world's uncertainties outside the classroom.

For this project, I investigated how 19 undergraduate students pursuing a minor in a climate change program came to terms with climate change through achieving learning outcomes outside of class. Namely, I focused on affective and cognitive learning outcomes because “affective and cognitive outcomes are critical catalysts for motivating people to engage in the desired behavior” (D. D. Sellnow et al., 2017, p. 4). Regarding affective learning, or the “the acquisition and development of feelings, values, and beliefs” (Hauenstein, 1998, p. 59), I found students affectively learned collective efficacy perceptions to cope with climate change. This study understands collective efficacy as affective when learned as an internal experience and behavioral when actions and skills, learned from instruction (Waldeck et al., 2010), are used to participate in shared efforts to address climate change. Concerning cognitive learning, I found students acquired, comprehended, applied, analyzed, synthetized, and evaluated climate change information (Bloom, 1956) through dialogic interactions with their peers outside of class; this communication aligned with the sensemaking frameworks found in organizational communication. Yet, I extend sensemaking to instructional communication by emphasizing how cognitive learning is immanent to creating sense dialogically through iterative interactions. These findings suggest coping and sensemaking are crucial for students to come to terms with climate change after instructor-delivered fear appeals to access the efficacy needed to face this planetary threat. Ultimately, this study advances instructional crisis communication by providing insight into student to student out-of-classroom communication and how it affects cognitive and affective learning outcomes concerning climate change.

**Climate Change Instructional Crisis Communication**

It is generally understood in the literature that crisis is risk manifested (Coombs, 2009) and that crisis is “a disruption of activities that, potentially, lead to devastating consequences” (Kuntzman & Drake, 2016, p. 3). Ulmer (2015) clarifies further that crises can be intentional (e.g., terrorism) or unintentional (e.g., natural disasters). Coombs (2009) divides crisis communication into three phases: pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis. Pre-crisis involves prevention, crisis concerns directly addressing the crisis, and post-crisis includes learning from the crisis in its aftermath. The climate crisis paradoxically encompasses all three phases at once. It is both a “crescive” crisis because it accumulates slowly and over lengthy time scales (Beamish, 2002, p. 4) and also an acute crisis through extreme weather that leads to natural disasters (Kuntzman & Drake, 2016).

Instructional crisis communication is an intersecting, burgeoning field that develops novel insights in a critical area of scholarship. Recently, scholars have noted the necessity of instructional communication within crisis situations to “aid the human condition and, at times, actually save lives” (T. Sellnow &
Sellnow, 2010, p. 124). Indeed, as Coombs (2009) contends, “Crisis communication would benefit from research that addresses specific instructing information concerns” (p. 106) as “We can never diminish the critical role of instructing and adjusting information” (p. 113) in crises. T. Sellnow and Sellnow (2010) take up this call, arguing that effective instructional messages must acknowledge Kolb’s (1984) entire learning cycle of thinking, feeling, doing, and reflecting with particular attention needing to be placed on feeling and doing. T. L. Sellnow et al. (2012) follow the call as well, finding that “tailoring [instructional] messages based on learning style preference, gender, and group type will maximize their persuasive impact” in crisis situations (p. 641). Instructional crisis communication is an expanding field, one with potential for further growth—perhaps found in its connection with climate change.

Significant to instructional crisis communication, climate change bears characteristics that obstruct learning outcomes. Climate change is spatially and temporally overwhelming, which Verlie (2019) describes as an experience “of being rendered incapable [behavioral],” and one that “emerges from encounters with problems of an incomprehensible [cognitive] and possibly insurmountable scale, ones that do not just disable, but dissolve our sense of self [affect]” (p. 755). Another characteristic is that climate change is invisible—fossil fuel emissions are not discernable—and therefore it “may be difficult to understand [cognitive] and believe [affective] the presence of the problem” (Schreiner et al., 2005, p. 9). An additional issue impacting student learning outcomes is how individual contributions seem insignificant. Schreiner et al. (2005) note that “Young people may experience that [climate change] is out of reach of their actions [behavioral]” (p. 10). Despite students’ attempts to lower their individual carbon footprints, “the total global emission of greenhouse gases will continue to increase, and one’s feeling of powerlessness [affect] may increase in pace with the public focus and concern” (p. 10). Last, climate change carries socioscientific controversies with moral, ethical, and political dimensions and “Avoiding such issues obscures the nature of science and leaves students to their own devices as to how they reconcile a value-free [affect] understanding of science with the value-laden realities of socioscientific issues” (Owens et al., 2017, p. 48). Climate change instructional crisis communication is marked by these significant constraints on learning outcomes, which must be surmounted for some degree of learning to transpire.

**Affective Learning Through Collective Efficacy and Coping**

Efficacy theories provide insight into how students may, through affective learning, acquire beliefs that their actions can lead to desired outcomes in the context of climate change. Bandura (1999) names two types of efficacy. First, perceived self-efficacy “refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Second, whereas self-efficacy is belief in an individual’s ability to affect change, perceived collective efficacy “is defined as a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments” (p. 477). Collective efficacy, then, is the shared belief that a group’s collective actions can bring forth desired changes in their experience, local or global. As Bandura (2000) explains:

People's shared beliefs in their collective efficacy influence the types of futures they seek to achieve through collective action, how well they use their resources, how much effort they put into their group endeavor, their staying power when collective efforts fail to produce quick results or meet forcible opposition, and their vulnerability to the discouragement that can beset people taking on tough social problems. (p. 76)
When applied to environmental crises like climate change, it may be more effective for instructional crisis communication to focus on students learning collective efficacy rather than self-efficacy. Although a strong sense of self-efficacy informs one’s capacities for collective efficacy (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2002), self-efficacy alone may be inadequate in the context of global environmental crises; the systemic nature and planetary scale of these issues eclipse an individual’s capacities for action. Therefore, Homburg and Stolberg (2006) advise “it may thus be more appropriate to assess people’s beliefs in collective efficacy as opposed to individual efficacy” (p. 7). Indeed, students often feel their individual efforts are insignificant in the face of climate change (Schreiner et al., 2005); therefore, as Armstrong et al. (2018) suggest, “collective actions may feel more appropriate given the scale of the problem” (p. 64). Overall, it seems fostering collective efficacy in instructional crisis communication is more suited to meeting the demands of the climate crisis than self-efficacy.

In addition to providing affective pathways for meaningful action, instilling collective efficacy through instructional crisis communication may also help students cope with the enormous threat of climate change. Coping is “a process contributing to the reduction of uncertainty and complexity of a situation” (Homburg & Stolberg, 2006, p. 2). Coping can be viewed through the lens of collective efficacy, where collective action effectively leads to desired outcomes that reduce uncertainty and complexity by “restor[ing] a sense of understanding and order” (T. L. Sellnow et al., 2012, p. 634) in a crisis situation. In fact, Homburg and Stolberg found that coping with global environmental problems is determined more by collective efficacy than self-efficacy. Centering on students, Chawla and Cushing (2007) write, “Left to themselves, young people can easily feel disempowered by the scale of environmental problems” (p. 446). These scholars continue, noting that educators can empower students by providing the opportunities “for social and environmental change” they need “to acquire a collective sense of competence” (p. 446). Armstrong et al. (2018) would agree that instructors play a pivotal role in student coping. They advise educators to “avoid engaging terror management responses” (p. 78) by approaching climate change through collective action frames. Altogether, instructional crisis communication should foster affective learning so that students acquire collective efficacy not only to provide actionable beliefs, but to also aid in the coping needed to manage climate change fear responses.

**Cognitive Learning Through Sensemaking**

Sensemaking may provide a theoretical framework for how students achieve cognitive learning outcomes concerning climate change to access efficacy. Sensemaking is particularly suited to cognitively learning about a global crisis because this communication “allows people to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity by creating rational accounts of the world that enable action” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). Sensemaking is a social, discursive, and active process (Weick, 1995) that is both retrospective (Weick, 1995) and prospective (Gephart et al., 2010). In other words, people sensemake with others through communication to (re)construct meanings of the past, present, and futurities. Sensemaking consists of people collectively generating and shaping one another’s sense through ongoing, iterative, and repeated cycles.

Sensemaking is a four-step process which involves ecological change, enactment, selection, and retention. Weick et al. (2005) describe these four steps as the “reciprocal exchanges between actors (Enactment) and their environments (Ecological Change) that are made meaningful (Selection) and preserved (Retention)” (p. 414). When changes are perceived in the environment, data is organized through noticing and bracketing cues. Then these nascent categories are narratively parsed into meaningful chunks through the creation of plausible stories. The narratives are retold to reinforce the sensemaking
and provide more substantial guidance for future interpretation and action. Indeed, narratives are central to the sensemaking process as they reveal “not only who is involved and what they are doing but also the meanings that they are constructing in the process” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 81).

Scholars have noted the need for sensemaking in crisis situations. As Gephart Jr (2007) argues, crises “clearly require sensing and sensemaking if they are to exist as meaningful phenomena to members of society” and that “a crisis exists only when certain events or cues are sensed or noticed and then interpreted as crises by sensemaking” (p. 126). Climate change, then, must be perceived as a crisis via sensemaking before meaningful action can be taken. Gephart Jr continues, noting how sensemaking can provide “important insights into how people construct and interpret crisis events” (p. 155). Exploring the sensemaking of climate change is therefore important to understanding the meaning making around this crisis. Additionally, engaging in sensemaking is crucial to climate change because when it is inadequate, probabilities increase “that [a] crisis will get out of control” (Weick, 1988, p. 305). The climate crisis is particularly vexatious with sensemaking. Climate change’s qualities include “its immense complexity and—because it is insufficiently understood and never entirely predictable—its resulting uncertainty” (Moser, 2010, p. 35). If climate change is to exist as a recognizable crisis—one that impels appropriate action—then its cues must be interpreted despite its cognitively perplexing characteristics.

In this study, I extend sensemaking to instructional communication by drawing attention to cognitive learning and its immanence in communicative meaning making. Although sensemaking is primarily studied in organizational communication contexts, its concern with “the crucial role communication plays in influencing human cognition” (Malphurs, 2012, p. 61) is applicable to environmental education (Hulland & Munby, 1994) and instructional communication through the cognitive learning domain. Cognitive learning involves comprehending, synthetizing, and evaluating information while sensemaking can be understood as the role people play in “constructing the very situations they attempt to comprehend” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 58). Sensemaking, then, involves one using information at the same time they situationally learn that information. Indeed, Maitlis and Christianson (2014) explain in a review on the sensemaking literature that this communicative process is critical to individual learning. Further, Catino and Patriotta (2013) conclude from a study of the Italian Air Force that individual sensemaking affects learning outcomes. Sensemaking, then, can be approached as an act of cognitive learning.

To find theoretical frameworks that complements students engaging in dialogic interactions around environmental issues, I turn to interpersonal and ecological sensemaking. First, interpersonal sensemaking is a process whereby individuals attend to interpersonal cues, which include behaviors and actions, to make sense of their organizational realities (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Second, ecological sensemaking creates a sense of environmental processes and conditions (Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). While Whiteman and Cooper focus sensemaking at the micro level, this study examines ecological sensemaking at both local and global scales to account for students making sense of the science surrounding climate change and the social dynamics that generate and perpetuate the crisis and its consequences—as well as the attendant controversies (Owens et al., 2017).

Taken together, collective efficacy and sensemaking offer a lens to study how students learn (affectively and cognitively) to come to terms with climate change. This approach extends instructional crisis communication research in two ways: first, by considering efficacy primarily from a collective lens as a coping mechanism and second, by connecting ecological with interpersonal sensemaking as a means
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for cognitive learning around an ever-emerging ecological crisis via interactions with peers. Therefore, I propose the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do students affectively learn to cope with the immense threat of climate change with their peers outside the classroom?

**RQ2:** How do students cognitively learn about the immensity of climate change with their peers outside the classroom?

**RQ3:** Does affectively and cognitively coming to terms with climate change outside the class afford students the efficacy needed to engage with this planetary crisis?

**Methods**

The participants of this study are 19 undergraduate students who were enrolled in a program centered around the study of climate change named the Climate Change Studies (CCS) minor at a U.S. university; to note, this program only offers a minor and not a major. The CCS minor, which has roughly 70 students each semester from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds, requires nine courses: The Introductory to Climate Change course, and two courses each in the physical, society, and solutions areas. Students are also given ample opportunities to interact with one another through symposiums and gatherings to foster a sense of community. The CCS minor offers a unique opportunity to research students coming to terms with climate change who are consistently exposed to its immense threat in class.

I received the University’s institutional review board approval for all research procedures. Access was then negotiated to the study by asking permission from the director of the CCS minor to interview students enrolled in the minor. I undertook this request with respect and sincerity due to the grief students may feel from climate change and its consequences (Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018). Out of the roughly 70 students in the minor, the CCS director provided a contact list for 20 students, 12 of whom consented to being interviewed. Amended permission was received from the University’s institutional review board to conduct focus groups. Again, I approached the director and requested access to more students for the focus groups. I received a list of another 15 students whom I emailed; seven students consented to participate in focus groups. In total, the students’ ages ranged from 18–32 years; 10 identified as female and nine as male. The students represented varying progress through the minor: five had taken the Introduction to Climate Change class, seven had progressed to some degree throughout the minor, and seven had finished the program. The students were assured of their confidentiality and signed consent forms.

My multi-methodology began with the perplexing question of how people affectively, cognitively, and behaviorally come to terms with a threat so vast it is on a planetary scale. I conducted two sets of data gathering. First, 12 respondent interviews were conducted, 20–45 minute in length, over 2 weeks. Using an interview script, students were asked to speak of their peer and dialogic interactions within the CCS minor. Questions were thematically designed to generate data but also dynamic enough to foster an interpersonal relationship with the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I interviewed students until I had achieved theoretical saturation of the data (Saunders et al., 2018). Second, following my findings in the interviews that students were enacting sensemaking, I conducted focus groups to specifically discover how people sensemake. Two separate focus groups were conducted; the first had two students
and the second had five (one student from the former group mistakenly attended the latter group—therefore the former focus group consisted of only two students). Focus groups were conducted to empirically examine and capture the sensemaking process in vivo (Tracy, 2013). In other words, I sought to record genuine sensemaking from the students in real time. Sensemaking was triggered (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) in the focus groups through posing questions that highlighted the ambiguity and uncertainty of climate change.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and then coded. For the interviews, first-cycle coding was used by examining the data and capturing the students’ words and phrases, known as In Vivo Coding (Saldaña, 2009), to illuminate the students’ own voice in describing their communication practices. I then second-cycle coded—Pattern Coding—to organize the previous codes into distinct categories to tease out the theoretical constructs found in the data. For the focus groups, In Vivo Coding was used again to clarify the sensemaking processes in action. After coding both the interviews and focus groups, I identified “significant and multi-faceted” (Tracy, 2013, p. 207) exemplars that embodied the data’s essence.

**Results**

These results are summarized, first, in terms of how students, following climate change classes, attend to the overwhelming fear of climate change through coping collectively with their peers. Second, I report how students grappled cognitively with climate change’s immensity through sensemaking with their peers. Last, I discuss how students sought collective efficacy narratives from their peers, mentors, communities, and the media.

**Affective Learning Through Collective Efficacy and Coping**

Students affectively learned collective efficacy perceptions to cope by (deliberately or not) perceiving their community, whether the minor, their city, or country, to be active in mitigating climate change; this in turn informed their capacity to cope with climate change after classes on that subject matter. When asked how a sense of community aids in attending to climate change, one student responded:

> It helps knowing more people are worried about it. That might be one thing that drew me to the [CCS] minor. Coming to this university and seeing so many students and professors who had dedicated themselves to climate change helped me feel better about it.

This student coped through seeking collective efficacy in the will to address climate change in the university’s students and faculty. Another student said, “As long as I am seeing more people every day creating unique ways of impacting climate change, then I feel hope from that positive trajectory.” Students described similar experiences where, by finding evidence of collectivity, they gained efficacy perceptions that informed capacity to cope. In contrast, students unable to find evidence of collectivity found that their overwhelming fears remained intense. One student grated, “I need meaningful one-on-one conversations about how climate change is hanging over us all. But no one wants to talk about that, especially the professors.” This student did not discover evidence that the collective will could impact the immensity of climate change as her community did not desire to speak about the potential ramifications of climate change. They, and other students with similar perceptions, were less able to cope with climate change than those who had affectively learned collective efficacy perceptions.
Validation of the Fear From Climate Change

Students also coped with climate change after their classes by seeking and offering emotional validation from their peers collectively. Students found relief when other students acknowledged their fears as valid and acceptable. When asked of the importance of talking with peers after fearful climate change lectures, a student described her experiences walking home after class as helpful, explaining:

It helped all of us walking together after class to know that we were allies to each other in the intensity of learning this information, which was really cool to feel that we could learn about something and connect with it intellectually and emotionally through one another. I think it was really important that we could share in the fear of climate change.

The student felt their fears were manageable when others acknowledged and even shared their affective intensity. Other students stated the need for others to “lift them up” after a heavy climate change lecture, or how “just knowing that other students are worried about climate change” gave relief from their intense fears. Students commonly stated in the interviews that they sought this sense of validation from their peers. When their fears were collectively validated, students were more at ease with their fear responses, making them less overwhelming.

Students were less able to cope when their fears were not collectively validated. When asked if they discuss fearful climate change classroom messages with their peers outside of class, a student said:

I do not feel like I am “one of them” with the other students. I believe that they are slightly terrified of the obvious pessimism that I exude . . . I feel that we are fucked with climate change and nobody wants to listen to that.

This student did not have validation from their peers; consequently, their perceptions of climate change tended to be fatalistic. Similarly, a student shared, “I do not feel like I can have a meaningful conversation with anyone about the state of the world.” Students who did not have their fears validated tended to be more pessimistic and closed off to possible solutions to mitigate climate change. Significantly, students who did perceive a collective will to mitigate climate change and experienced validation of their fear responses were more likely to cope, which informed their capacity to cognitively come to terms with climate change through enacting sensemaking with their peers.

Cognitive Learning Through Sensemaking

Students cognitively learned of climate change following their classes through engaging in sensemaking with their peers. The sensemaking proceeded through two phases. First, students enacted sensemaking with their peers to make sense of their relationship with climate change and, second, once plausibility was (temporarily) established and sensemaking was therefore concluded, the students forwent sensemaking with their peers in favor of addressing the crisis.

Students often stated the difficulty in holistically understanding climate change. When asked to describe their grasp of the issue, a student stated, “Climate change is a hard thing to comprehend sometimes because you feel so powerless in the whole thing.” Students were driven to make sense of the immensity of climate change and their relationship to it to establish cognitive learning with the crisis that would enable positive action.
Students enacted sensemaking processes typically in their freshman, sophomore, and into their junior years at college. By their senior year, students tended to have concluded their sensemaking of the issue, at least regarding the current sense surrounding the state of the planet, its climate, and its anthropogenic perturbation. Students’ sensemaking was characterized by dialogic interactions outside of class where they would share and exchange pieces of information they had learned in class, bouncing their sensemaking off one another. An example of such dialogic interaction follows, simulated through a focus group.

**Example of Enacted Sensemaking**

The focus group consisted of two students, whose pseudonyms are Amber, a junior who was still in the sensemaking process, and Jasmine, a senior, who had concluded sensemaking. I asked how the United States will recover international trust following the Trump administration’s inaction on climate change. The students responded with sensemaking. Amber said that it is difficult because people who support President Trump do not accept the scientific consensus on climate change and tend to label opposing perspectives as “fanatical.” Jasmine agreed, saying that a lot of people have opposing views, which isn’t helped by media giving equal airtime to skeptics. Amber replied that she cannot understand how people trust climate change deniers. Jasmine responded by noting how people latch onto their beliefs and values. Amber agreed, speaking to the difficulty of connecting to people’s unique worldviews when those life framings are so implicit they may not even be able to articulate those views. Jasmine suggested that even with that difficulty, there is the possibility of connecting to others through shared commonalities. Amber countered by offering a narrative of her mother not accepting climate change because she could not see its evidence in her lifetime. The conversation then shifted to another topic.

In the above example of sensemaking, Amber did not find a resolution to the question posed in the beginning. However, that was not the purpose of the sensemaking she enacted with Jasmine. Indeed, the purpose was not to find comfort or peace with climate change, but to find a measure of sense surrounding the crisis. Amber’s sense of climate change shifted when she agreed with Jasmine that some people are more influenced by their beliefs and values on a topic than the scientific consensus. Then, when Amber offered her own interpretation of Jasmine’s statement, she enacted her own, now furthered, sense. Intriguingly, the sensemaking in this instance did not seem to benefit Jasmine as much considering the high level of sense she already held on the crisis, a topic I will explore when I discuss the conclusion of student sensemaking.

**The Enactment of Sensemaking**

To cognitively come to terms with climate change, students conducted sensemaking separate from their exposure to the information received in their classes. When asked how they talked to their peers about their climate change courses after class, a student said:

> I think a lot of the conversations while walking to dinner were reflective. We would learn about climate change in class. And then we would talk about what we learned and be like, “Oh, that makes sense now.” Like, about why climate change is happening due to our impact . . . We did this as humans, this happened and will impact us as humans. It was just cool to connect the dots and see that is what we were all finding.
The students made sense through “connecting the dots” where they would connect an offered point of sense (one dot) to another sense point, stringing together senses until they had the ah-ha!: “Oh, that makes sense now.” Other students reported the “circular” conversations with their peers helped in “wrapping my head around the issue” and “connecting and laying out where the problem was coming from.” These dialogic interactions were the primary method students used to make sense of climate change outside of their classes.

Students were more receptive to enact sensemaking with their peers if they shared a similar sense around climate change. In response to a question of the importance in talking to their peers once they have received fearful climate change messages in class, a student said:

After every class I would walk home with other [CCS] students . . . it was a very emotional time for us to be together. We talked about solutions and what we could do to get involved. These talks felt right because we were all on the same level as far as the information we were getting and the level of knowledge we had . . . and not necessarily ignoring the sad information we had just received, but integrating that into what we needed to know and to remind us about the importance and intensity of climate change.

Students were drawn to make sense with other students at similar levels of sensemaking. It may be that students had greater capacity for sensemaking with one another if their shared sense was similar. Alternatively, perhaps students searched for peers with similar sense simply to discover others with a shared need or desire to make sense of climate change.

Narratives in sensemaking. Sensemaking students used narratives to make sense of the potential for humanity to impact the immensity of climate change. When asked how and why they look for efficacy, a sensemaking student said, “The stories of the students’ successes helped me see that taking action isn’t meaningless and does have an impact.” Stories helped this student select plausible accounts of people actively addressing climate change. Students reported similar thoughts, as one expressed they did not find efficacy in “rationality and objectivity” but instead when their mentors offered narratives of “human potential and connection in cohabitation with the Earth.” Sensemaking students sought these narratives not to discover exemplars to emulate, but instead to collect sense that demonstrated the possibilities for addressing climate change.

The Conclusion of Sensemaking

Statements of students enacting sensemaking following their climate change classes were common in the interviews. However, a divergence occurred when students seemed to have already made sense of climate change as they reported it was not beneficial to enact sensemaking processes with their peers. I asked a senior who seemed to have concluded sensemaking around climate change as well as the CCS program whether it was important to talk with their peers about fearful climate change messages. The student stated:

I would say it’s important to discuss the issue with my peers, but I think it gets redundant at some point. You can talk about the problems as much as you want, but eventually you need to come up with solutions. So, while I do think it is healthy to talk to my peers, now I prefer to talk to people who do not accept the science of climate change. I cherish those opportunities because I think it is so healthy to talk to people who don’t agree with you.
The student relays a common theme found among those who had concluded sensemaking: the process of sensemaking became unnecessary once students had made a plausible account of climate change. Indeed, other students said that talking with their peers soon became “pointless,” “not interesting,” or, they “would rather be doing something” about the crisis. Students, then, did not find sensemaking valuable with their peers after a certain point. Instead, students who had concluded sensemaking were primed to address climate change with efficacious actions.

Narratives for efficacy. Once students had made sense of climate change, then efficacy narratives were used to source examples of efficacy they could enact. When asked how and why they seek out efficacy, a student who had concluded sensemaking stated, “When you hear a story of somebody doing something to solve climate change, it’s cool, and you can relate to it, but then you want to take the parts of the story and make them your own.” The student found stories to be a source to which they could imprint themselves upon. In response to the same question, another student expressed that efficacy narratives can “ground climate change information in a way that’s manageable and hopefully useful.” This student found stories, at least those most plausible, to offer information they could use to address climate change. Indeed, students who had made sense of climate change looked for narratives where people were successfully mitigating and adapting to change to find actions that they could enact.

Discussion

This study explored how students affectively and cognitively came to terms with the immense threat of climate change outside their initial exposure to climate change fear appeals communicated in their classrooms. They did so through coping via collective efficacy perceptions (affect) and by enacting sensemaking (cognitive) outside their classrooms with their peers. For RQ 1, I found students affectively learned to cope with climate change through gathering collective efficacy perceptions by seeking evidence of collective climate action and engaging in peer validation. For RQ 2, I found students cognitively learned about the immensity of climate change by enacting sensemaking with their peers through dialogic interactions outside the classroom—ultimately serving to neutralize the overwhelming intensity of their fears. Last, for RQ 3, I found students have greater access to both individual and collective efficacy after coming to terms with climate change; once their sensemaking concluded, students tended to no longer wish to enact sensemaking and instead desired to take action to address climate change. These findings suggest coping and sensemaking are crucial for students to come to terms with climate change after instructor-delivered fear appeals to access the efficacy needed to face this planetary threat. Ultimately, this study advances instructional crisis communication by providing insight into student to student out-of-classroom communication and how it affects cognitive and affective learning outcomes concerning climate change.

Students affectively came to terms with climate change by learning to cope. Students learned to affectively cope by gathering collective efficacy perceptions, and did so in two ways: first by seeking evidence of collectivity and second, validation of their fear responses. First, students coped by seeking evidence of a collective will, which aligns with research establishing collective efficacy to be effective at promoting engagement with climate change. Chen (2016) discovered that when individuals are presented with intense fear appeals in climate change communication, their collective efficacy perceptions are more effective at rousing their positive engagement with climate change than their individual efficacy perceptions. Significantly, students located collective efficacy perceptions by perceiving climate change as a comic rather than tragic apocalypse. Foust and O'Shannon Murphy (2009) define the comic frame as one where,
despite our mistakes, humanity can avert the worst of climate change and the tragic frame as one where climate change is an unavoidable fate. Students often oscillated between these two frames during the interviews; however, the students who had come to terms with climate change were more likely to view the crisis as amenable to human intervention rather than an inevitable fate. Overall, collective efficacy is an essential component in climate change fear appeals delivered in instructional crisis communication; not only because collective efficacy provides beliefs that a collective will can mitigate climate change, but because students use collective efficacy perceptions to cope with the climate crisis.

Second, students affectively learned to cope with climate change through seeking and offering validating messages to their peers. Students helped one another to cope by recognizing and accepting their fears around climate change. When the overwhelming intensity of those fears were minimized or rejected, those students tended to become more hopeless, uncertain, and powerless. My findings align with Ojala (2015) who found that youth experience lower efficacy when instructors deny the seriousness of climate change. Validation of one’s climate change fears, then, promotes access to efficacy. Students inherently understood that validation promoted efficacy and worked to validate their peers for two reasons. First, to help the peer manage their overwhelming sense of fear. When peers felt validated by others, their perception of collective efficacy was heightened by their perception of a collective will found in their validators. Second, to ensure their peers would have the efficacy needed to be a contributing member of the collective will to mitigate climate change, which furthered the validating student’s own collective efficacy perceptions; in effect, students coped by validating their peer’s fears. When validating or being validated, the mechanism that assuaged the students’ fears was the perception of collective efficacy.

Students cognitively learned to come to terms with the immense threat of climate change by enacting sensemaking with their peers through dialogic interactions outside the classroom. This interpersonal, ecological sensemaking was triggered by the ambiguity and uncertainty of climate change. Students enacted sensemaking through iterative, circuitous, and processual conversations with peers who shared a similar level of sense surrounding climate change. Through sensemaking, students constructed intersubjective meanings of climate change that enabled action through the now-formed plausible accounts about the potential means one could use to address the crisis despite its immensity, which served to neutralize the overwhelming intensity of their fears. Concurrently, neutralizing the overwhelming intensity of their fears afforded students further access to efficacy. Coping with the intense fears of climate change allows sensemaking and, in turn, sensemaking neutralizes the overwhelming intensity of those fears. Indeed, I found cognitively learning to come to terms with climate change is necessary due to the individual’s affectively perceived comparative insignificance to the immense scale of the threat. Coming to terms involves an individual affectively and cognitively integrating their comparative insignificance to the immense scale of climate change to attain a holistic, unfragmented sense of the crisis. Significantly, coming to terms with climate change is an arduous learning endeavor that may take years.

Students affectively and cognitively learned to come to terms with climate change by their junior or senior year through creating a plausible account of climate change that afforded their access to efficacy. This is not to say they are experts on this complex issue or that they would never need to sensemake again; further sense will be needed as the climate crisis evolves. Rather, the students had reached a “temporary resting [point]” (Sonenshein, 2007, p. 1029) in their sensemaking where they had created a plausible account for the current state of climate change which enabled their action to address the crisis. Meaning, by concluding sensemaking, students had access to the efficacy recommendations taught in their classes. Students accessed efficacy recommendations given in class not immediately through the
efficacy message itself but through coming to terms with the threat the efficacy message was designed to address. Before students came to terms with climate change, they used collective efficacy perceptions for coping; however, once students came to terms with climate change, both collective and self-efficacy recommendations did serve to bolster the students’ overall efficacy.

In climate change instructional crisis communication, collective efficacy and sensemaking work together to provide affective and cognitive learning outcomes in the climate crisis. In particular, this study extends the instructional and crisis communication literature’s focus on self-efficacy—affective in perception and behavioral when enacted—(Frisby et al., 2013; Seeger, 2006; T. Sellnow & Sellnow, 2010) to include collective efficacy, particularly in global environmental crises like climate change. Self-efficacy by itself does not meet the demands of vast crises. Additionally, this study found that sensemaking may be central to cognitively learning about environmental crises that are planetary in scale. While instructional crisis communication scholars find a need for instruction in acute crises to “provide appropriate messages quickly in order to mitigate the rising potential for harm” (T. Sellnow & Sellnow, 2010, p. 118), this study demonstrates that in crescive global environmental crises, instructors should instead foster dialogic interactions to help students make sense of the vast complexity of the crisis situation. In sum, the climate crisis shifts the needs for an instructional crisis communication response.

Practical Applications

While this study focused on learning outcomes outside the classroom, it also informs practical applications for climate change instructional crisis communication in the classroom. First, instructors should support teaching climate change facts with affectively instructing “students how to recognize, be aware of, respond to, value and enact with the world around them” (Thweatt & Wrench, 2015, p. 501). In particular, instructors should focus on how students can engage with large-scale efforts to address climate change to help students affectively learn to “acquire a collective sense of competence” (Chawla & Cushing, 2007, p. 446). Second, cognitive learning outcomes can be developed in class through fostering dialogic discussion among students. Innes (2007) finds in his study a low instance of high-quality classroom discussions. Therefore, Innes (2007) proposes that instructors model classroom discussion through their example and for students “to develop demonstrations of good dialogic discourse and present them before the class” (p. 16). In doing so, students will have greater opportunities to access the sensemaking that leads to cognitive learning outcomes. Last, regarding efficacy as a behavioral learning outcome, instructors using classroom fear appeals should “modify their messages to enhance learning and efficacy” (Frisby et al., 2013, p. 254). In particular, when designing efficacy messages, instructors should present “high efficacy solutions so that the messages can achieve the best persuasive outcomes” (Li, 2014, p. 255). Modifying fear appeals to meet a class’s shifting needs will be a highly applicable skill. Following these practical applications in class will increase the effectiveness of instruction to achieve learning outcomes within the climate crisis.

Limitations

Despite reaching theoretical data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018), the 19 students studied across 12 interviews and two focus groups of seven participants total may represent a limitation in qualitative research design due to the sample size. For interviews, qualitative researchers and evaluators recommend either 12 (Guest et al., 2006) or 13 (Francis et al., 2010) interviews to reach data saturation. The interview sampling in this study, then, is largely consistent with these findings. To attain data saturation for
focus groups, a sample size of either three (Guest et al., 2017) or three to five (Namey et al., 2016) are recommended. Therefore, I may have needed a higher sample size in the focus groups to reach an adequate measure of data saturation. Yet, Hagaman and Wutich (2017) find the number of interviews needed to attain data saturation may depend upon the research design and questions. Extending this insight to the integration of interviews and focus groups (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008), I found the data saturation first garnered from the 12 interviews aided in later reaching data saturation from the two focus groups. Regardless, data saturation is not the only marker of quality when conducting qualitative research. As Sebele-Mpofu (2020) concludes, other important measures exist, including “credibility, diversity, conformability, trustworthiness and reliability” (p. 15). In retrospect, more focus groups were needed to meet these measures.

**Conclusion**

When I recall the wildlife biology professor’s lecture and his deliberate use of climate change fear appeals, I am not sure if he truly understood what students were effecting when they conversed with one another outside of class. However, over time, I think he saw the results of those conversations. Given my intense exploration into the matter culminating in this research, I find myself questioning if his use of fear appeals benefited the students. The answer, I discover, is complicated. Yes, his deliberate use of climate change fear appeals impelled the students to engage in peer dialogue. However, the CCS minor was designed around students encountering climate change in the context of a supportive community. Thus, I am concerned the effectivity of his fear appeals was found more in the community than the messages themselves. I recommend instructors take into consideration their students’ capacities for coping and enacting sensemaking with their peers before deliberately using climate change fear appeals. Instructors should emphasize the fear immanent to climate change only if measures are taken in class to establish the affective and cognitive learning necessary for students to cope and sensemake outside of class. Ultimately, climate change instructional crisis communication is effective when instructors approach affective and cognitive learning with care and respect. Then, instructors can teach students how to efficaciously enact their behavioral learning while confronted with this planetary threat.

**References**


Online Learning in a “Fancy Prison”: The Impact of COVID-19 on the International Student Academic Experience While Living in a Quarantine Hotel

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Keywords: international students, online learning, quarantine, isolation, pedagogy, coronavirus, COVID-19

Abstract: The rapid development of the COVID-19 pandemic during the spring 2020 academic semester resulted in many international undergraduate students evacuating the United States to return to their home countries. Some faced government-mandated quarantine in a designated quarantine hotel upon their entry into the country which overlapped with the end of the spring semester or start of summer term. Interviewers conducted qualitative interviews on Zoom with international students enrolled at American universities regarding their experiences with online learning while in isolation. This extreme environment had negative implications for their psychological well-being as well as their ability to self-motivate. Researchers formulated best practices based on the data to assist instructors and institutions in making better decisions regarding the academic experience of students who may be forced into quarantine in an unfamiliar environment in the future.

Introduction

In spring 2020, American universities and colleges faced the difficult decision to move in-person classes online in light of the COVID-19 crisis. The University of Washington became the first American university to halt in-person classes and shift to remote learning in early March 2020 (Baker et al., 2020). Most higher education institutions followed suit quickly thereafter and shuttered their physical doors to open virtual ones. This quick shift to remote learning created difficult decisions for faculty, staff, and students as the virus impacted nearly every aspect of a student’s college experience (Smalley, 2020).
Online Learning in a “Fancy Prison”

For example, college students quickly had to make decisions regarding their finances, housing, and academic futures.

As the virus continued to spread from spring into summer, approximately three quarters of the world’s countries suspended travel (Brumfiel & Wilbur, 2020). International students faced the difficult decision of whether to stay in the United States or return to their home country and risk issues with their visas or even exposure to health risks (Rust et al., 2020). Nonetheless, many international students studying in the United States left the country to avoid border closures and essentially becoming trapped in the United States. This migration of international students to their home countries may have gone unnoticed by some faculty. However, the transition for international students was not seamless as many faced restrictions or challenges upon arrival to their home countries.

Although every country tackled the COVID-19 pandemic differently, many mandated persons entering the country to quarantine, including staying in a quarantine hotel. These isolation units popped up worldwide from Australia (Shepard, 2020) to South Korea (Sang-Hun, 2020). Thus, some international students experienced immediate quarantine once they returned to their home country. Because of the timing of their flights and required quarantines, some students finished their spring 2020 coursework online while living in a quarantine hotel. Researchers explored the impact of quarantine on students who were forced to complete the spring and summer 2020 semesters online due to the pandemic.

Through qualitative interviews, this project identifies the environmental, psychological, and educational challenges international students experienced when leaving the United States in spring 2020 and entering a quarantine hotel. Some interviewees were unaware of their new living situations until they boarded planes leaving the United States. The majority of interviewees experienced academic stress due to technology and online learning while also combating loneliness and boredom. This project centers around the unique and unusual situation of quarantine hotels to help provide a better educational environment for undergraduate students who are forced into quarantine isolation while taking online classes.

**Literature Review**

COVID-19 changed the landscape of education in the United States and around the world. With the outbreak of the virus, most educational institutions suspended in-person learning (Daniel, 2020). Researchers also found students learned less during government-mandated lockdowns (Engzell et al., 2021). In particular, the suspension of in-person learning negatively affected students who already were low achieving as it removed in-person faculty support (Grewenig et al., 2021). Researchers found students prefer in-person education over online learning as they may feel they have fewer resources and more difficulty in communicating with their instructors in a virtual setting (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). There are additional factors to consider when thinking about the additional challenges faced by students studying abroad and those posed in general by online education.

**International Students**

The number of international students studying in the United States increased prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, over one million international students attended American universities (Bastrikin, 2020). Jennings (2017) indicates a number of reasons motivating students to study in the United States,
including the quality of American schools, an interest in learning a new language, and increased job prospects. American colleges and universities may have attempted to attract larger numbers of international students as students from overseas generally pay out-of-pocket for tuition (Aw, 2012). International students also benefit from studying abroad, such as personal growth and development and a transformed worldview (Conceição et al., 2020).

Despite these benefits, both universities and international students have to overcome a few institutional and interpersonal difficulties. With the expansion of the international student population studying in the United States, universities found their students and faculty experienced obstacles when assessing a student's credentials, language skills, and measuring a student's previous academic experiences (Aw, 2012). In sum, some international students arrive in the United States with different expectations for their studies and face challenges adapting to a new culture. Standardized testing is in place for many of these areas. Still, despite having some set standards, many international students struggle with adapting to a new culture which may impact their academic performance (Andrade, 2005). The following sections identify common areas international students experience stress and how online learning can exacerbate the difficulties adapting to unfamiliar learning styles.

**International Student Challenges and Stress**

Research posits communication is the most significant challenge experienced by international students as it results in reduced academic performance (Mori, 2000), which can lead to academic and psychological stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Mori suggests that communication apprehension may cause international students to not understand the material, hinder their ability to ask questions, and even impact note-taking in class. Furthermore, the act of asking questions can cause an international student to feel like a burden, which can exacerbate already present emotional distress (Taliaferro et al., 2020). Other factors may include a student's socialization with others as one's ability to build relationships with others and create those social connections necessary to overcome cultural barriers (Dove & Bryant, 2016). Unmet interpersonal needs can also create emotional distress (Taliaferro et al., 2020). Thus, researchers decided to explore whether unexpectedly moving online during spring 2020 while staying in quarantine might have limited or completely erased interpersonal connections within a course.

Social isolation can lead to slowing the acculturation process for international students (Dove & Bryant, 2016). To academically succeed, international students need support from faculty and success centers, social support from friends and family, an opportunity to become involved in activities, as well as ample time spent in the country for cultural adaptation (Rabia & Karkouti, 2017). When forced into isolation at quarantine hotels, students lose many avenues of socialization with not only U.S. American students, but also their peers from their home country. Spending 14 or more days in physical isolation can lead to depression, especially if students cannot incorporate their preferred strategies to cope with stress and anxiety (Gebregergis et al., 2020).

Further complicating academic and emotional distress is the fact education is structured differently across countries. For example, in China a student expects more examinations and the course to be instructor-focused such that students are more passive in the classroom (Huang, 2012). Instructors in the United States teach in styles different from their academic colleagues across the globe and the result may be poor academic performance for those students unfamiliar with the teaching style (Telbis et al., 2014). The following sections argue the structure of an online learning platform may negatively impact a student's academic performance.
Online Learning

Research demonstrates online education can be effective if the instructor is able to plan accordingly; however, the pandemic forced instructors to switch to emergency online teaching without much notice (Hodges et al., 2020). Across many disciplines, research demonstrates some students have a more challenging time achieving academic success in an online course than a face-to-face course (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Students that indicate a preference for in-person learning over online faced challenges in adapting to remote coursework during the pandemic (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Online coursework demands students become responsible for their own learning, as they navigate a newfound responsibility for keeping track of assignments. Both faculty and students agree that students must be driven, use time effectively and efficiently, and take ownership of their academic performance to thrive in an online learning environment (Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Additionally, faculty report that it is harder to maintain students’ interest, especially in instances with a large class size (Boerema et al., 2007). Students’ lack of interest and oftentimes lack of motivation can negatively impact their academic success (Pregitzer & Clements, 2013).

An unsuccessful academic experience on an online platform can be caused by students feeling isolated, feeling overwhelmed by the academic content, having a lack of investment in the course, and having a lack of motivation to succeed in the course (Bambara et al., 2009). As mentioned above, interpersonal connections with the instructor and classmates create a sense of belonging. Bambara et al. (2009) also argue engagement helps “the classroom feel real” (p. 224). A sense of community within an online class can also help prevent students from feeling overwhelmed by unfamiliar and complex course material. Students also reported that the organization of a course and frustrations with technology cause them to feel overwhelmed. If students feel overwhelmed by the online content, they will not be able to focus and emotionally invest in the course, which will lead to a loss in motivation.

Instructors need to be aware of cultural differences when designing online courses (Kung, 2017). Some cultures predominantly use a traditional face-to-face educational model; thus, online education is uncommon. For example, Chinese students are accustomed to a teacher-centered pedagogical style and prefer to receive course content in a face-to-face environment (Tan, 2018). Taiwanese students also prefer a face-to-face instructional model instead of online classes (Wang & Reeves, 2007). Thus, the sharp transition online in spring 2020 could have been a negative experience if the student was not familiar with navigating an online format or from a different culture. Due to the stress and anxiety international students already experience, instructors may need to modify their online courses to consider how culture impacts student learning (de Alvarez & Dickson-Deane, 2018).

Online engagement strategies such as videocasting (video podcasting) and collaborative discussion forums increase academic performance for international students (de Castro et al., 2020). International students can pause and relisten to lectures, which can help clarify concepts and ease academic stress (Sherry et al., 2010). Videocasting is also a more reliable resource when studying for an exam (Evans, 2008). Lecture-directed discussion boards help guide conversation for international students who might feel anxious about a language barrier (de Castro et al., 2020). Discussion boards are also helpful as international students report feeling more anxiety about their oral language skills than their written skills (Sherry et al., 2010).
Instructors need to be strategic when integrating technology into their courses and adjust their pedagogy to ensure academic success (Okojie et al., 2006). Online course design can negatively impact student engagement and material retention (Wang & Reeves, 2007). Thus, instructors need to consider how their use of technology will improve course delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to rapidly move online and students had to quickly transition. This project explores the impact of online learning on international students while in quarantine.

**Method and Analysis**

For this study, two researchers employed qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews via Zoom and used an interpretive qualitative lens to analyze the data. A qualitative approach allows researchers to emotionally engage (Tracy, 2019) with participants when discussing stressful events, such as being isolated in a quarantine hotel while enrolled in online classes. The semi-structured interview guide created space for interviewees to identify important or interesting aspects of their experience, giving interviewees agency to guide the conversation (Tracy, 2019). In other words, we did not impose or interrupt their narratives to follow a rigid set of questions. Qualitative interviewing also provides flexibility when collecting data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For example, if the internet cut out during the interview researchers could pause and restate questions with ease. Following Tracy's (2010) “Big Tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research, this study is considered rigorous as the two interviewers collected data until the data became saturated. The following subsections identify the interview and analysis process.

**Interview Process**

Seven undergraduate international students were interviewed for this study. Using a snowball sample, researchers first contacted students in their own courses via email. Then the interviewer asked if the interviewee knew of any of their friends who had similar experiences and would be interested in participating in the study. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded. Researcher 1 took notes during the interview and Researcher 2 conducted the interview. The interviews lasted 20–40 minutes. Due to IRB restrictions to ensure interviewees remained confidential, researchers did not collect demographic data beyond the student’s physical location. However, Table 1 includes the pseudonyms used to identify each participant along with the location of their quarantine hotel.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participants</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pseudonyms</strong></td>
<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>Bolivia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aziz</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
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<tr>
<td>Said</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mariam</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lupe</td>
<td>Bolivia</td>
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<td>Abdul</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
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<td>Amir</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
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All of the interviewees stayed in a quarantine hotel during the end of the spring term or the beginning of the summer term in 2020. Four students were from Kuwait, two were from Bolivia, and one was from Egypt. One student had returned to the United States at the time of the interview but had been in a quarantine hotel during spring 2020. Two of the interviewees were in the quarantine hotel when the researchers collected data, four were interviewed after being released, and one was interviewed after he or she returned to the United States.

We asked five questions: (1) Describe the process of leaving the United States and returning to your home country, including how you ended up at the quarantine hotel, (2) Walk me through a typical day being in the quarantine hotel, (3) How has this situation impacted your ability to learn while enrolled in online classes this summer, (4) What advice would you give to a teacher working with students who are in your situation or a similar situation to make the learning environment better, and (5) How do you manage stress and anxiety given that you are in this situation? Researchers then asked if there was anything else the interviewee wanted to include to ensure they were able to fully describe their experience outside the confines of five questions.

Analysis

Both researchers transcribed and coded the interviews. Researchers used an inductive content analysis by theming patterns within the students’ experience (King et al., 2018; Thomas, 2006), meaning themes emerged and were coded during the analysis process. A codebook was created that identified three implications for student learning (1) environmental, (2) psychological, and (3) cognitive. For example, when answering questions (1) Describe the process of leaving the United States and returning to your home country, including how you ended up at the quarantine hotel and (2) Walk me through a typical day being in the quarantine hotel, students described how unusual the experience was, specifically within the environment. For example, students had flown home many times before, but the airport experience was different this time. They also shared how alarming it was to physically enter the hotel and universally described the space as a prison.

Interviewees also focused on the psychological impact of the hotel when answering question (2) Walk me through a typical day being in the quarantine hotel. Participants framed their behavior or routine around feeling hungry or bored. They also experienced loneliness during their isolation. When asked questions (5) How do you manage stress and anxiety given that you are in this situation, they provided strategies for overcoming the previously explained feelings of loneliness and boredom. Last, questions (3) How has this situation impacted your ability to learn while enrolled in online classes this summer, and (4) What advice would you give to a teacher working with students who are in your situation or a similar situation to make the learning environment better, encouraged interviewees to explain the cognitive impact of their experience. Thus, that information became the final theme. It is clear the environment influenced their psychological state, which impacted their cognitive abilities.

Findings

Before providing recommendations on how to structure an online learning model for students in quarantine hotels, it is first important to understand how the experience impacted their ability to learn online. As explained above, this project found three major themes within the students’ experience of staying in a quarantine hotel while taking online classes. The three themes include the impact of their
environment, their psychological or emotional state, and the effects on their intellectual achievement or learning. The following sections identify the interviewees’ thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and ideas to improve learning for students in similar situations.

**Environmental**

Students reported their experience of stress when initially traveling back home. Amir said his plane changed course mid-flight and instead of landing in Cairo, it landed in a different city. He explained, “It was pretty ugly that day, people started screaming; it was a mess.” Juan did not know he was going to a quarantine hotel until the same day as his flight, so he did not pack appropriately. Upon landing, the students faced unusual circumstances. The process between the airport and the hotel took 4 to 5 hours for Juan and Aziz. Juan explained once they landed, authorities sprayed him and his luggage with alcohol. Aziz was not allowed to leave the airport to smoke a cigarette. Abdul reported the government covered his bus in plastic.

For some students, staying in the hotel was optional. For example, Aziz chose to stay in the hotel because he shares a room with his brother at home. Similarly, Said reported having a small house and a large family. Both Aziz and Said chose to stay in the hotel to prevent possibly infecting their family members. The ability to choose where to quarantine can impact a student’s perception of their experience. Furthermore, Aziz had stayed at the assigned hotel before his quarantine experience which might have eased any feeling of anxiety or uncertainty.

Aziz explained the hotel provided medical care and food upon request. They also provided him with an electrical adaptor. Thus, Aziz was unable to use his computer to participate in his online class prior to receiving the adaptor. Mariam and Abdul wore tracking bracelets. Abdul reported having to take a picture of his face multiple times a day and upload it to a government app. Overall, the participants reported their hotel stay felt like a prison. Abdul was allowed to walk outside for 15 minutes to get fresh air. Even though Aziz did not leave his room for 20 days, he described the hotel as a “fancy prison.” However, Aziz had a balcony where he could smoke. Said did not leave his room for 14 days but reported that the view was “nice.” Mariam also could not leave her room and she explained, “I couldn’t see the sun even, we didn’t have a balcony . . . I didn’t know if it was morning or night until I looked at a clock.”

Only one of the participants, Mariam, reported having a roommate. Juan explained everyone had a single room even if there were two beds provided in the room. Abdul was supposed to have a roommate, but the room was too small and they requested separate rooms. After 14 days, Aziz became stir-crazy. Once his test results came back negative, he wanted to leave but the government required him to stay for a full 28 days. He became very frustrated as he felt the additional time was unnecessary. He discussed his frustration with the hotel supervisor and explained he was taking an online class and needed to return home. Eventually, the supervisor agreed, but Aziz had to wait a few more days for transportation. Thus, he only spent 20 out of the allotted 28 days in quarantine.

Juan explained the cost of staying at the hotel was usually $100. However, given the crisis, the price for people quarantining was only $25 a day. As a result of the reduced rate, the hotel did not provide people with large food portions. Finally, after the 5th day, the hotel allowed them to order food through UberEats or other platforms. Lupe and Amir also reported being hungry and not being able to receive items from the outside. However, Lupe’s situation was even more complicated because she did not bring
her computer with her. She had to borrow a laptop from a staff member; however, the Wi-Fi was bad because everyone quarantining at the hotel used it for classes during finals week.

Overall, the evacuation process and the environment of the hotel were not conducive to academic success. Their unusual travel experience caused students to feel stressed and anxious. The hotel’s environment felt like a prison, especially for students who could not leave their rooms. The feeling of hunger and general frustration negatively impacted their emotional and psychological state.

**Psychological**

During the interview, three themes emerged regarding the students’ psychological and emotional state during their quarantine: boredom, lack of control, and loneliness. It should come as no surprise that almost all participants indicated feeling boredom while isolated in a quarantine hotel room for days on end. Most were in rooms with only beds, desks, and a television. Mariam only had her cell phone with her when she entered quarantine and therefore did not have a laptop to help distract her. Abdul and Amir reported feeling that there was “nothing to do.” Although all students were enrolled in classes online, that only passed a small portion of the day. Some participants were lucky to have sources of entertainment with them. Aziz passed the time away from class by watching “four television shows and more than 20 movies.” Whereas Said played video games as he only brought one book with him, which suggests that he did not bring any physical course material with him. It is clear that all participants had little advance notice of the situation and, therefore, did not pack things to do to distract them from their situation. Abdul did not know he would be required to stay in a quarantine hotel and only packed one bag that included “three t-shirts and two pairs of shorts.” He then had to wash them in the sink of his hotel room for the rest of his stay as outside objects and goods were not allowed to be delivered.

Four participants indicated feeling a lack of control or helplessness over their situation. Juan, Lupe, Abdul, and Amir all indicated they did not have agency in the decision to quarantine. Amir stated feeling stress resulting from an inability to do anything, being prevented from leaving, and not receiving objects from the outside. Abdul indicated concerns over a car he left on his university’s campus back in the United States and was uncertain what would happen to it. He also stated he was unsure when he would be allowed to return to retrieve the rest of his stuff. Furthermore, participants had very little autonomy to select their food, meal times, type of room, or determine the length of their stay.

The majority of participants focused on the effects of isolation and the inability to connect to others or socialize. They also reported a lack of direct human interaction; however, a few were allowed to interact with others during meals. Juan was permitted to eat meals with friends that he made on the airplane flight. Those meals were the only socialization he had during the quarantine and were his favorite parts of the day. In addition, Lupe was allowed to have some socialization during meals because she was in the first group of students returning to her country. However, she learned groups after her were socially isolated as they were not permitted to eat together. Aziz was fortunate to have a balcony where he made friends with an older man quarantining in the room next door. They would speak outside on the balcony at a distance, but other than that individual he had no face-to-face human contact.

The majority of participants relied on technology for all human connection. As a result, Mariam was bored and lonely. She indicated her friends would all FaceTime each other and sometimes they would not even speak. They would sit on FaceTime, so they knew they were not alone. Similarly, Amir had a
group chat with people from his flight and was not allowed to see anyone face-to-face. Aziz combatted loneliness by communicating with friends and family over the phone. He indicated, “it was difficult to not be able to physically socialize.” He missed activities like going outside or having dinner with friends. Mariam’s situation did not permit her to socialize with anyone outside of her room. She had a roommate only because the person had been her roommate back in the United States. Aside from the roommate, she had no direct face-to-face human interaction. As a result, Mariam indicated speaking with friends and students enrolled in the class helped relieve the feelings of loneliness.

Despite having technology and limited in-person interactions, a few participants indicated feeling disconnected from the world. Abdul spoke to his friends and family on the phone and video chat, but he still felt disconnected from the outside world. Juan would open his window and put his head outside for a few minutes a day to remind him there was a world and life outside of the room. Therefore, although students indicated engagement with their peers via technology helped, they still experienced loneliness. It may be useful for instructors teaching students in this environment to include more group work that creates more opportunities for students to connect to each other. The following section will identify how the environment’s psychological effects impacted the students’ ability to focus on schoolwork.

Cognitive

Students reported several stressors relating to the coursework itself or the learning process while isolated and taking online classes. Three of the participants located in time zones outside the United States’ standard zones indicated the difference in time impacted their ability to submit assignments and even stay awake for class. Aziz explained he received feedback from faculty that he was the first person to submit assignments or reply on discussion boards. However, Aziz turning in assignments first was simply the result of being ahead in time which impacted the timing of his submissions. Mariam altered her sleep schedule to be awake in the United States’ time zone, even though that decision resulted in her sleeping for “14 hours a day.” Additionally, Amir summarized his advice for faculty teaching students enduring a similar experience to understand “it is even harder to take classes online in a different country with a different time zone.” Abdul indicated even though he had plenty of time to do the work he lost track of time as the “days blurred together since we were closed off from society.” Of note, no students in a standard American time zone indicated an impact on sleep or assignments.

There were also unexpected drawbacks for these students regarding the online format. Lupe and Amir both encountered difficulties in transitioning online. For Lupe, it was the first time she had ever taken an online class. She indicated that she did not know what to do at times. Amir also described classes online as “difficult.” Furthermore, students reported feeling frustrated not being able to engage with their faculty or even ask questions to the instructor face-to-face. Lupe indicated some of her professors were unfamiliar with online teaching, which made her feel “lost” in the class. Additionally, she chose not to reveal to her professors that she was in a quarantine situation as she worried they would think she was making excuses. Therefore, she remained silent about her experience and felt she could not speak to her professors about the course. Amir encountered a total lack of communication with his faculty because the hotel did not have Wi-Fi for 3 days. Amir summarizes his online learning experience simply by saying, “it is hard to take classes online.”

Other participants lost focus on schoolwork due to the psychological and environmental impact of the experience on them. As referenced above, many students did not receive adequate-sized portions of
food at mealtime. Juan could not sleep due to his hunger, which directly impacted his ability to focus. Lupe and Abdul remarked on the difficulty in concentrating as a result of being in the same unchanging environment. The students lost motivation and focus on assignments even though they had ample time simply because, “when you’re in the same place with the television, phone, and a bed, it is hard to be focused or motivated to write an essay” (Lupe). Juan kept focus first by following a routine, but then he started playing video games to alleviate his boredom and lost track of time. Therefore, hunger, inability to focus, lack of motivation, and boredom appear to be common themes experienced by participants in this situation.

Not all participants disliked online learning in this environment. Said preferred the quiet of the hotel and was able to study. He mentioned twice in the interview that it was “a cool experience” since he could not hear his neighbors and enjoyed the quiet place to study for exams. Aziz also had a positive experience engaging in online learning as his instructors took attendance, created opportunities for group work, and even virtual tutoring sessions where he could get extra assistance. His online course was structured so that he could organize his time and move through the online modules at his own pace. He enjoyed this structure and felt he had the necessary support due to instructional videos on how to navigate the online platform, Zoom, and other resources. Finally, Mariam also reflected on positive experiences in that her professor recorded lectures and posted them online. She highlighted the importance of flexibility in her experience.

While the interviewers did not ask about the students’ final grades or feedback from their instructors, it is clear that some experienced many negative elements to their academic experience. Others enjoyed the quiet space and had ample support from their online instructors. The key difference in the students’ experience was instructor involvement and the structure of the course itself. While some students felt disconnected from their peers and their professors, others felt adequately supported by their faculty members and could engage in some socialization with classmates. Last, faculty members who remained flexible with their material created a positive learning environment.

**Implications and Recommendations**

The goal of this study is to help faculty develop online programs for students living in a stressful environment such as a quarantine hotel. Findings revealed the quarantine hotel experience negatively impacted students’ psychological and emotional states which, in turn, negatively impacted their ability to focus and feel confident while enrolled in online classes. Findings support Pregitzer and Clements’ (2013) research that argues if online students are uninterested or unmotivated, their academic success will be negatively impacted. However, there are several ways instructors can enhance a student's learning experience while in an unusual environment. The following sections identify ways instructors can reconsider their communication, course organization and assignment development, and strategies to remain flexible during uncertain times.

**Communication**

As previously explained, online courses can lack interpersonal connections (Bambara et al, 2009; Taliaferro et al., 2020). Based on the above findings, students in quarantine hotels reported a lack of socialization and some even experienced full isolation. Thus, incorporating interpersonal connections as part of the course design will not only positively impact a student's physiological well-being but also
enhance students’ communication apprehension (Mori, 2000). Thus, it is important for instructors to invite international students to chat during virtual office hours. Engaging with students during office hours creates the opportunity for instructors to encourage students to ask questions, which will prevent the student from feeling like a burden (Taliaferro et al., 2020). Communicating through office hours will also help students from passive learning cultures understand areas of improvement (Huang, 2012).

As Rabia and Karkouti (2017) suggest, international students need support from faculty. Thus, it is also imperative that instructors trust students when they disclose issues. For example, Lupe explained the Wi-Fi in the hotel was bad because everyone was using it and Amir’s hotel lost internet for 3 days. Technological issues are frustrating for everyone. However, the goal when communicating with students is to reduce their feeling of being a burden. Thus, when students reach out it is important to remain empathic as that will ease the students’ stress and anxiety. Furthermore, instructors should actively ensure their communication style does not add to an already stressful experience.

**Course Organization and Assignment Development**

Based on the students’ responses, we argue faculty need to strategically increase academic success and decrease moments of isolation by designing community-focused courses. For example, assignments that require group work can inspire camaraderie and friendships among students. Instructors should also craft assignments that will shift students’ focus to the future, such as mapping out a professional plan after graduation. This approach will help distract the student from their stressful present environment. Assignments that are interesting and generate excitement will also help distract students. However, Boerema et al. (2007) recognize tailoring courses to student interest to avoid boredom, such as that experienced in quarantine hotels, could be difficult with large class sizes.

All of the participants reported that their hotel stay felt like a prison. The most extreme example was Mariam being unable to tell if it was morning or night due to the lack of windows in her room. Thus, interviewees lost track of time. To extend Bambara et al.’s (2009) suggestions for making a classroom feel more “real,” instructors should design the course with a routine pattern. In this structure, students will be able to keep track of their days. For example, incorporating regular due dates for assignments will help students keep track of their assignments as it creates clarity and structure. This strategy will specifically help students in different time zones because it can encourage them to work ahead. For example, Aziz was the first person to submit assignments or reply on discussion boards simply because his time zone was ahead of the United States. The feeling of being ahead of schedule can boost a student’s academic confidence. Working ahead can also be accomplished if the entire course is open and includes pre-recorded lectures. This approach also aligns with Sherry et al.’s (2010) suggestion that pre-recorded lectures can be paused and re-watched, which is particularly helpful for international students. Reorganizing courses to accommodate international students in unusual situations might require a change in pedagogy. However, instructors should critically reflect on why they are attached to a specific course design. Specifically, reflect on who is struggling with the rules and restrictions within a course design and adapt to ensure those students are academically successful.

**Flexibility**

Remaining flexible will also help instructors when considering how time zones impact class meetings and assignment deadlines. When in an online environment, one tactic to avoid time zone issues is to simply email the class before it starts to find out if any student is in a different region of the world. This
approach will be helpful as students cannot predict how their country will respond to COVID-19 and its variants. The most extreme unexpected circumstance is Amir’s plane changing its destination mid-flight. Thus, remaining flexible will reduce the stress the student is most likely already experiencing. Furthermore, in the same email, an instructor can ask students to reflect upon their own skill set when it comes to online learning. Students may have varying degrees of experience with online learning or, in some cases, none at all. For example, Lupe and Amir both struggled with transitioning online; especially since it was Lupe’s first experience taking an online class and she was unfamiliar with the platform and format. She also did not feel comfortable asking the instructor for clarification. Knowing the skill level of students may influence the amount of time an instructor spends explaining how to complete an assignment online or even whether or not the instructor reviews the online platform being used so that all users understand the features.

Next, flexibility also applies to course content delivery and understanding of technical problems. If students are in different time zones or quarantine hotels, consider allowing students to work at their own pace. This will give them a sense of control or agency they do not have while in quarantine. Working at their own pace will also ease the anxiety of Wi-Fi access. Lupe reported the Wi-Fi was bad because everyone else in the hotel was also using it. Also, Amir reported completely losing Wi-Fi for 3 days. Thus, it is understandable if some students are unable to communicate or submit assignments timely. If a student is in a stressful environment and claims the internet is problematic, working with the student on deadlines may help alleviate some of their anxiety.

**Conclusion**

One limitation of this study is that some of the interviews took place after the students had emerged from their quarantine stays. While all participants were able to reflect on the challenges of learning while isolated, it is possible some of their memories of their time may have faded with time. Additionally, the quality of the hotels ranged from rooms with balconies to others with no access outside. In others, there was not enough food or there was poor internet. Therefore, not all of the participants had the same quality of living environment even though many shared themes emerged from this research.

The research implications for this type of situation are endless. Future research could include a focus on the American student experience while in isolation in a quarantine dormitory. Some American universities and colleges set aside dormitories to serve as quarantine spaces for students during the fall 2020 semester (Hartocollis, 2020). The American quarantine dormitory experience could be different than an international quarantine hotel experience. This study included participants who were from different cultural backgrounds. In that regard, analyzing a sample of participants from the same cultural background may also provide valid insight into best teaching practices as some students from different cultural backgrounds may be better equipped for a quicker transition to online.

There also are implications relating to a student’s familiarity with online learning. Some participants in this study have already been familiar with online learning as opposed to those who were forced to learn online for the very first time. Similarly, analyzing responses from students enrolled in the same subject matter could shed more light on the impact of isolation on a student’s academic experience since the participants in this study were all enrolled in different courses. Finally, more research is needed regarding the impact the quarantine hotel had on a student’s grade and learning outcomes as this study focuses more on the student’s well-being and overall experience as opposed to measuring the academic impact.
This study identified how a stressful environment such as a quarantine hotel can impact a student’s emotional state and motivation to engage in the learning process. Additionally, this environment can negatively impact one’s ability to focus or overall cognitive ability. Based on these findings, researchers have provided recommendations for faculty to consider when creating an online class which can be used not just in quarantine situations, but universally. Through self-reflection on course design, communication practices, and improving flexibility, instructors hopefully will be able to improve a student’s morale and learning if they are forced into unusual living situations.

References


Middle-Class “Chavs” From Working-Class Areas? Habitus, the Attainment Gap, and the Commodification of Higher Education Among Communication Students in England

Martina Topić, Audra Diers-Lawson, and Christian Goodman

Keywords: communication, research-informed education, U.K., habitus, the attainment gap

Abstract: The purpose of the article is to compare and contrast higher education and research among public relations and journalism students of middle-class and working-class origin. The paper applied Bourdieu’s theory of habitus to analyze prejudices against the working class, explores whether working-class students express an anti-education view, and whether the appreciation of education (and research in particular) is a predominantly middle-class attitude. Focus groups and an online questionnaire were used to obtain views of students at a university in Northern England. Triple coding (open, axial, selective) was used and the data was then analyzed and presented using thematic analysis. Findings show that early socialization about education as well as students’ type of neighborhoods (habitus) influence studies’ views of higher education and research in particular. While the findings show some similarity with views in the literature of the middle-class being more inclined to value education, these findings show that this is true only for those who grow up in middle-class areas whereas middle-class students who grew up in working-class areas show working-class attitudes toward education. Equally, working-class students who grew up in middle-class areas show what is usually perceived as a middle-class view of education. Both groups of students show a tendency toward embracing a consumerist view of higher education.
Introduction

This paper analyzes views of research education among public relations and journalism students, particularly concerning the class origin of students and the area in which they were socialized.

Questions of professionalism and integration of people from different backgrounds into public relations have been actively discussed with some authors arguing that to fully professionalize, PR education should not only focus on vocational teaching but also on research-informed teaching because it not only improves the quality of practice but also the representation within the industry (Fitch, 2014; Kruckeberg, 1998; Tallent & Barnes, 2015; VanSlyke, 1983). Other studies have analyzed developments in PR education, such as the state of crisis education and history of PR education (L’Etang, 2002; Welch, 2015; Wright, 2011), persuasive communication (Sarbia-Panol & Sison 2016), ethics (Austin & Toth, 2011), pedagogy (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999; Lubbers, 2002), and women in higher education (Theus, 1985; Weaver-Lariscy et al., 2009) to name a few; but again there is little to no discussion of the impact that class has on the student experience and outcomes in the field.

In journalism, the debate has mostly been centered on analyzing changes to journalism as a profession and questioning how course programs could respond (Mensing, 2010). Moreover, the traditional focus of journalism education research has highlighted the debate on vocational versus research-informed teaching to ground journalism education (e.g., Hirst, 2010; Macdonald, 2007). Like in public relations, little research has explored class aside from a few papers analyzing the impact of class on media consumption (e.g., Lindell & Sartoretto, 2018) and the diversity issues of representation in the profession (Merrill, 2019).

Despite evidence that a research-led approach leads to positive outcomes for students overall, there is a dearth of research on student attitudes toward this approach and the influence that class may have on the success of research-informed teaching, which is especially problematic because generations Y and Z are fundamentally different from those that came before. For example, Generation Z is known for taking technology for granted and preferring multimedia education (Pearson, n.d.). According to an analysis by McKinsey, Generation Z is highly individualistic but not necessarily consumerist because this generation is seen as caring and seeing consumer goods through access rather than possession (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

The situation is the same in communication education where there is little attention paid to differences in experiences of students based on class and socioeconomics more broadly. While the fields of public relations and journalism do actively debate and research the state of higher education, there is little attention to class issues. Class is simply not considered as a diversity variable in the extant research in the field and class research remains within the sociological domain of inquiry.

Therefore, of all issues of diversity, access, and privilege in communication-related higher education, the impact of socioeconomic status or class remains the one that is systematically understudied as we seek to begin to better understand some of the critical factors affecting student experience, attainment, and attitudes about modern approaches to PR and journalism education. We do so by comparing the attitudes and experiences of working- and middle-class students within the frame of the dominant pedagogical attitude of research-informed learning.

This paper endeavors to open an important discussion about class in higher education (Squire, 2020), especially in the United Kingdom. In so doing, we focus on the impact of habitus on student
expectations and attitudes (Bourdieu, 1977, 1989, 2007) and we contribute to knowledge on higher education, expectations, and attainment from a class perspective arguing that class origin and personal background provide valuable information that can influence strategies on student attainment and student recruitment. This research focus is particularly relevant because, according to The Boyer Commission (1998), a practice has emerged in universities with active research staff to actively integrate research into the undergraduate curriculum with findings demonstrating several benefits from employability to an increase in enrollment in postgraduate programs. Moreover, PhD completion rates are improved when students participate in conducting undergraduate research (Bauer & Bennett, 2003; Gonzales-Espada & Zaras, 2006; Lopatto, 2004). This represented a meaningful change in perspective because historically undergraduate education was seen as in conflict with research and, thus, Boyer’s (1990) proposition to “break out of the tired old teaching versus research debate” (p. xii) suggested possibilities for integrating research and teaching and stop seeing these two activities as competing. Instead, Boyer proposed that research and teaching should be seen as complementary and inextricably linked.

Boyer (1990) thus proposed to see universities as ecosystems or communities where scholars and students research and learn together, thus coming up with the term “communities of learners” (The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998). Boyer’s perspective complements Palmer’s (2014) and van Ingen et al.’s (2015) research suggests that there are three principles needed to adapt to the needs of today’s learners: (1) providing resources and learning materials supporting multi-modal learning ranging from visual aids, videos, in-class exercises, and lectures; (2) providing an immersive environment where students can discuss the convergence of theory and practice, developing exercises that maximize student learning, and collaborations between instructors and students to target professional skills; and (3) providing multiple methods to engage student learners using flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments to create “expert learners” that are resourceful, knowledgeable, strategic, goal-oriented, purposeful, and motivated.

While there are different understandings of research-informed teaching in higher education, a common theme is that academics and students can use active research programs to collaborate and co-produce research with their students. This view of research integration argues that instructors should co-produce research with their students and that programs should formally teach students about the role that research plays in their discipline, but focus on knowledge produced by research (Healey, 2003; Willison & O’Regan, 2007). This view is also aligned with the English Higher Education Academy (HEA) suggesting that such approaches can increase student satisfaction, improve employability, and contribute to experiential learning (Burgum & Stoakes, 2019). This is emerging at a time when questions about the readiness of new graduates to enter the workplace are also generating considerable debate within the field of communication (Diers-Lawson, 2021). Some research suggests that new graduates have core skills deficiencies compared to supervisor expectations (Todd, 2014). For example, the research identifies the difficulties in developing the necessary critical and creative thinking skills to be effective corporate communication practitioners (Tallent & Barnes, 2015). However, in an era where crises are increasingly common and social responsibility is an emergent expectation for doing business research, this also suggests that new graduates ought to value transparency and ethical decision-making as communication practitioners (Curtin et al., 2011). Yet, only a minority of development needs for communicators are addressed through suitable training programs (Zerfass et al., 2012).

Therefore, in the subsequent part of the paper, we provide a cultural context of the class issue in the U.K. both generally and respective of the higher education system. We also elaborate on habitus research
generally and respective of higher education, and as the literature review below will show, we identify research gaps.

The main aim of the paper is to explore to what extent habitus influences differences in the educational experiences of working-class and middle-class public relations and journalism students in England and to what extent working-class students value research education in comparison to middle-class students. This focus of the research is relevant for several reasons, (a) as we demonstrate in the literature review below, there are general prejudices of working-class individuals in the U.K. seen as anti-intellectual and what is often known as belonging to consumerist culture, which also includes not valuing education. We wanted to probe this stereotypical perception and explore whether one's habitus or an area in which they grew up influences views of education rather than one's family class/sociodemographic origin; (b) as we already emphasized, most studies are tackling this issue in the context of communications education, and this is relevant because public relations and communications industry in the U.K. remains White and middle class, and the situation is very similar in universities, despite calls for diversifying the workforce (CIPR, 2020; Parker, 2019; Waddington, 2017). Therefore, this study breaks these stereotypes, as findings have shown that it is not one's origin but rather a habitus that influences views which has the potential to influence university recruitment as well as hiring processes often entrenched in bias against working-class individuals (Kelly, 2019; Le Poidevin, 2020; Social Mobility Commission, 2019a).

Class, Prejudice, and Education in the U.K.

In the previous section, we summarized contemporary thinking in higher education, identified the emergent importance of research-informed teaching, and also problematized the dearth of diversity research in public relations and journalism education with regard to class. Unfortunately, the need for research connecting class and education is not simply a matter of filling a gap; the working class face deeply entrenched prejudices and disadvantages, especially in British society and is especially true in higher education where these prejudices are deeply engrained (Crozier et al., 2019; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Squire, 2020). In the United Kingdom (U.K.), the class origin is still the largest predictor of a person's educational achievement, which explains why class must return to the research agenda instead of maintaining a focus on individualism and arguments that achievement is a result of personal effort (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; McCulloch et al., 2006; Social Mobility Commission, 2019b; Squire, 2020).

Cultural Denigration of the English Working-Class

Cultural denigration of the working class are manifested through pejorative language and negative symbolism of the working class is prevalent across the U.K. Within England, one example of class-based cultural prejudices includes derogatory language like “chavs” or Chavers. Strong regional accents associated with working-class populations (e.g., Liverpudlian, Geordie, Yorkshire) are consistently mocked across popular culture including television and film. Additionally, there are also style-related prejudices like negative prejudices against tracksuits, hair, and makeup stylings. One common prejudice, for example, is linked to clothes where chav identity is linked to types of clothing like sportswear or

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1. It is notable that CIPR reports often emphasize race as a diversity issue and while research and resources mention that practitioners are White and middle class, there is rarely any mentioning of experiences of working-class practitioners. This is common in the U.K. and the Law Gazette called this problem an “unseen prejudice” (Law Gazette, 2020).
2. Chav or Chavers are typically used for specific geographies and is often more broadly linked to parental occupation, geography, belonging to lower socioeconomic classes, and are associated with brash or loutish behavior (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009).
fashion brands like Burberry, Rockport, Kappa, Berghaus, and Lacoste; thus creating a negative brand reputation amongst middle-class consumers because they do not want to be identified as a chav (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009). Moreover, chavs are seen as people who belong to the underclass and celebrate consumerism as a culture (Burchill, 2005; Hayward & Yar, 2006; Young, 2012). They are also viewed as possessing low cultural capital and are thus alienated and disfranchised from the rest of the society (Martin, 2009; Sutton, 2009). Moreover, members of the middle class often construct their identity as being in opposition to the working-class chav as a way to mark themselves as “respectable” instead of as a threat to good social order (Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2007; Skeggs, 2004).

In the context of education, this discourse has three effects on the social perceptions and judgments of people: (1) “aesthetic (regarding matters such as décor, clothing and appearance); (2) performative (regarding behavior and performance expectations); and (3) and moral (regarding values)” (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009, p. 468). Class identities often represent moral judgments and are used to “other” members of working classes because the privileged experience comes from the middle-class socioeconomic status ascribing negative characteristics and “othering” the working class.

**Class and Perpetuating Inequality in Higher Education**

There are both economic and cultural implications to the class that affects life opportunities and exacerbates attainment gaps between the groups that are exemplified and reified in education systems from early childhood education through higher education (Archer & Francis, 2006). E. O. Wright (1998a, 1998b) addresses economic relations when defining classes arguing that the material welfare of one class depends on the exploitation of another class creating the opportunity for structural economic oppression. Simply stated, higher education centers on middle-class expectations and thus disadvantages working-class students (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). Friedman and Laurison argue that this disadvantage to the working class is reflected in working life because most professional and managerial occupations are still largely held by the middle class in the U.K. compared with people from working-class backgrounds. Therefore, to better understand the problem of the economic and cultural exploitation of the working class and address ways for higher education to respond, it is important to understand the cultural experiences connected to education attainment (Bergman & Joye, 2005).

The prejudices against the working class have included two primary judgments about working-class students: that they are disruptive and not serious about their education (Byrne, 2019; Crozier et al., 2019; Willis, 1977). For example, in a study of middle-class pupils in London, Hollingworth and Williams (2009) found these prejudices among middle-class children who defined working-class students as those who do not care about their education. What is worse is that these prejudices seem to be reflected in continuing attainment gaps in the U.K, where working-class students are significantly less likely to attend university—especially the so-called elite institutions (Squire, 2020). Moreover, research demonstrates that working-class students often report feelings of inferiority, dislocation, and struggle to navigate the middle-class spaces of higher education (Crozier et al., 2019; Crozier et al., 2008; Reay et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2010; Squire, 2020). They report often finding themselves struggling to manage their identification as working class while also not fitting into the middle-class social group either (Byrne, 2019; Crozier et al., 2019; Squire, 2020). Authors argue that because British higher education typically emphasizes middle-class values to the exclusion of creating valued space for working-class experience, students have to work to overcome their identity as working class and modify their behaviors in order to be seen as conforming to the middle-class expectations (Ingram, 2011, p. 288).
These findings suggest that working-class students not only face access and privilege problems because they must overcome negative stereotypes but also are likely to struggle to meet the expectations of a middle-class environment because they have not been equipped to know how to meet those expectations (Doolan et al., 2016). One of the core assumptions in higher education is that middle-class students attending university invest in their education while the working class often sabotage their education (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009). This view ignores the lived realities of working-class students who often do not have the luxury of the typical “student experience” both in and out of the classroom because they have other inhibitors, like needing a full-time job while they are at university (Crozier et al., 2019; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Squire, 2020). Thus, an important question to consider is whether universities themselves also systematically limit working-class achievement. And this is potentially the great irony in higher education—it is supposed to be a way to enable people to change their socioeconomic reality; however, it may be the system itself that perpetuates inequality with schools in working-class areas regularly performing worse than schools in middle-class areas and creating a glass ceiling that perpetuates both the prestige of the middle class and underachievement for the working class in higher education (Doolan et al., 2016; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Reay et al., 2005).

**Habitus**

In research exploring the impact of working-class identities on educational attainment, one of the critical conclusions is that the conditions in which people grow up unconsciously direct their attitudes and experiences in higher education, including the ways that they experience student life (see, e.g., Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Crozier et al., 2019; Reay et al., 2010; Squire, 2020). These findings suggest the concept of habitus may well be a critical factor in understanding and evaluating the student experience in higher education. Habitus represents the lasting predispositions, expectations, and schemes of perception that the environments in which people grow up have toward the institutions and environments they will come across throughout their lives (Bourdieu, 1977, 1989, 1993; Reay et al., 2010). In educational contexts, it has been used recently to better understand how working-class students engage with and react to the middle-class space of universities (see e.g., Squire, 2020).

Bourdieu (1977) argues that people grow up with their views on higher education being guided by early socialization and habitus. In particular, Bourdieu (1977, 2007) emphasized life experiences and the internalization of schemes that life experience produces, suggesting people rarely challenge how things are because practices are deeply ingrained into the assumptions of their social reality. While Bourdieu recognizes that there will be individual experiences that differ, the larger point is that systems or structures influence people’s lives and any individual can still be influenced by those systems or structures directly or indirectly. Therefore, people who share similar backgrounds and experiences also share a similar “habitus.” Ingram (2011) found that because of the shared life experiences, people growing up in working-class neighborhoods shared many attitudes with their families and neighbors.

**Habitus and Educational Attainment**

Research connecting habitus to educational attainment has also found that parental aspiration for their children is different amongst working-class and middle-class parents. For instance, Reay et al. (2009) found differences in parental aspiration for their children attending universities. In particular, they found that middle-class parents plan their children's university education in advance whereas working-class parents make fewer plans and sometimes even communicate negative attitudes about the value
of university education. Given the findings about habitus and the shared worldview, it would not be surprising that middle-class and working-class students might view education differently.

However, there is also a material reality to habitus, not just an attitudinal one. When we focus on systematic differences in experience, we must also consider the material differences affecting working-class education attainment. For example, in England, working-class students face obstacles accessing higher education as a result of austerity policies in higher education unique to England and Wales compared to the rest of the U.K.\(^3\) For example in 2017 Metro warned that the doubling of tuition fees and the rising cost of living would cause working-class students to drop out of the university (Smith, 2017) and Fact Check documented that working-class, part-time, and mature students are leaving universities in record numbers (Full Fact, 2017). Similarly, students from specific working-class neighborhoods—low participation neighborhoods (LPN)—remain significantly less likely to attend university compared to further education colleges (Atherton & Mazhari, 2019). In particular, authors found that over 50% of English universities admit less than 5% of White students from LPNs demonstrating a serious attainment gap in access to higher education for working-class students. However, according to data from UCAS (2018, cited from Discover Society, 2018) when working-class students attend university they are significantly more likely to attend post-1992 universities (teaching universities) compared to elite universities. This suggests that if we are to understand the working-class university experience, we should first focus on these university settings, which is another example of institutional habitus.

The U.K. has historical inequalities and working-class citizens historically face lower prospects in life and difficulties in changing their social status with social mobility being stagnant since 2014 and that class privileges remain entrenched from birth to work (Social Mobility Commission, 2019b).

Taken together, this literature review has demonstrated that: (1) class remains largely ignored in higher education and certainly within the communication disciplines; (2) class prejudice permeates English society including education attainment; and (3) attitudes about higher education and experiences in higher education are likely to be different between working-class and middle-class students. However, the present research leaves three critical research questions unanswered:

1. In what ways does habitus influence differences in the educational experience of working-class and middle-class public relations and journalism students in England?
2. Do working-class students value research education compared to middle-class students?
3. If there are differences in views of higher education between the middle-class and working-class students, can this be attributed to habitus?

**Methods**

In order to answer these questions and explore the impact of habitus on the learning environment for working-class students as well as their attitudes about the higher education experience, the present study explored student attitudes about research-informed teaching in public relations and journalism courses in post-1992 universities. These data focus on students’ views and perspectives on the value of research in the communication discipline as a part of the learning process at university. Thus, the paper explores the habitus in which working-class students were socialized and questions whether growing up in a working-class habitus has led to a working-class devaluation of higher education and research.

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\(^3\) University students from Scotland pay tuition fees at Scottish universities and students from Northern Ireland pay half the fees at Northern Irish universities compared to students from England and Wales attending university at English and Welsh universities.
This study adopts an interpretivist approach to better understand student attitudes (Saunders & Lewis, 2012) using two qualitative approaches. First, a semi-structured focus-group interview methodology was employed using a purposive heterogeneous sampling method to focus on those participants within the same course groups, separated based on self-identification as working-class or middle-class to ensure as homogeneous of a sample as possible within each of the groups included (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020; Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Second, an open-ended set of questions were distributed to additional students in order to ensure thematic saturation from the focus group interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected from students enrolled at a post-1992 university in Northern England. “New universities” are valuable sites for class-based higher education research because previous research suggests that working-class students are significantly more likely to attend these than the more “elite” Russell Group universities (Reay et al., 2010).

Three focus group sessions were carried out at the beginning of March 2020 and the research was then interrupted with a lockdown in the U.K. due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 23 students participated in focus groups including seven men and 16 women, which is proportionate for the present enrollment in public relations and journalism at the university. All of the participants in the focus groups were enrolled in public relations, journalism, or public relations with journalism courses at the university.

Though the intention was to collect all data via focus groups, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a change of method once lockdown was instituted. A further 18 participants (three men and 15 women) from the university were recruited to respond to an open-ended questionnaire addressing the same themes as discussed in the focus groups. Of the 18 participants, 13 were members of the journalism, public relations, or public relations with journalism courses; three were in fashion marketing; and one business studies. In order to ensure sample homogeneity, students who were not enrolled in public relations or journalism courses were excluded from the analysis leaving a total of 31 participants, of which 12 students were identified as working class and 19 were identified as middle class.

Class origin was decided based on the profession of the student’s parents. Aligned with E. O. Wright’s (1998a, 1998b; E. O. Wright & Cho, 1992) conceptualization of working-class and middle-class work, students whose parents do manual and service jobs were classified as working-class students (e.g., cleaners, drivers, chefs, guards, etc.) whereas students whose parents do the so-called white-collar or professional work were classified as middle-class students (e.g., teachers, priests, teaching assistants, lawyers, GPs, etc.). This reflects traditional approaches to studying class and education where scholars have focused on studying a combination of influences such as the education of parents, the institutions, and the social profile of students all of which are relevant for educational attainment (Cepić & Doolan, 2018; Condron, 2009).

Students were asked questions on their background (e.g., where they grew up, what the profession of their parents is), and the questions on their education socialization attitudes (e.g., what was the view of higher education that their parents promoted, which conversations of higher education did they have when growing up, who most influenced their views and expectations of higher education, what conversations did they have at home about employability and the value of higher education, whether they were the first to go to university, in what kind of area they grew up in), what their expectation was of the university
experience before they started their course, views of equal chances for employability, the dichotomy of higher education as focused on employability or enrichment through obtaining knowledge, the view on what type of learning fosters critical thinking, and their preferences toward research education and involvement in research. Students were also asked how they see themselves (e.g., as customers or members of the community).

Data Analysis and Reporting

The focus group data were transcribed then all data were analyzed using thematic analysis. At first, answers were analyzed generally and then cross-referenced against the class origin of participants and the data on socialization. The coding process implemented was an approach introduced by Morse and Richards (2002) and, thus, open coding was done first. This approach identified critical themes that emerged from the data and then axial coding helped in analyzing data against the class origin of students who participated in the research. Selective coding helped in capturing themes that emerged from each category of students and these themes were then analyzed to form a final thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was then carried out. This approach to analyzing data is

a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles. (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926)

The data is presented following the guidance offered by Braun and Clarke (2006) where findings are summarized in a figure and themes are presented using a narrative supplemented with direct quotes from participants. Thematic analysis is especially useful in research contexts when researchers work with rich data sets such as this one where there are transcripts from three focus groups and an open-ended questionnaire with 14 qualitative responses.

While thematic analysis is commonly used for identifying research gaps rather than theory building (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rohwer & Topić, 2018; Topić, 2020; Topić et al., 2019); in this case, the approach was deemed as useful as it enabled coding and cross-referencing data while providing meaningful themes that emerged from data. Additionally, with the dearth of research in the communication field about education and class differences, the thematic analysis helped identify trends in data in this case study and thus enabled recommendations for further research, as well as contributed to existing knowledge on the class origin and its distinctive impact on attitudes on education.

Thematic analysis is a sense-making approach meant to systematically analyze qualitative data and, as such, it is most similar to the quantitative methodology because it does not include a large critical analysis based on qualitative comments from research participants. Instead, thematic analysis enables a more systematic analysis of research data and a simple presentation of main themes that derive from data, and the findings are supported with some direct quotes from research participants. This approach helps in identifying trends, systematically presenting and analyzing them and thus also informing further research but it does not aim to generalize findings as a quantitative method would.

In the next section, we present findings from the thematic analysis focusing on main themes identified from data, and our interpretation is supported with direct comments from students who participated in the study.
Findings

The thematic analysis demonstrates three main themes that derive from the analysis; these are consumerist views of higher education, research as employability, and area of growing up as a predictor of one’s views of higher education and research (see Figure 1), thus showing that students come to higher education from a habitus where there are meaningful differences between middle-class and working-class areas; however, this means that the socialization is the main predictor of views of higher education rather than individual class origin.

FIGURE 1  Thematic Analysis Results

Habitus and Higher Education

Home community as a predictor of views of HE & research
Consumerist view of HE
Research as employability
Education Attitudes & Socialization

Home Community as a Predictor of Views of HE and Research

These data provide a comparison and contrast of views and experiences of students from middle- and working-class backgrounds. One of the clearest findings is that habitus itself seems to have greater influence than socioeconomic status alone. For example, working-class students who grew up in middle-class areas tend to show what is usually perceived as a typical middle-class view of valuing education. Middle-class students who grew up in working class areas equally tend to show attitudes more commonly ascribed to working-classes and equally working-class students who grew up in the middle-class area tend to show a middle-class view of education. For example, participants reflected:

“It would be good to go into higher education however it was too expensive for my family to afford” (M-C student who grew up in W-C area).

“It was praised and I’ve always been encouraged to go to university—almost as if there was no other way” (M-C student from an M-C area).

“Essential” (W-C student who grew up in an M-C area).

Further, among the public relations and journalism students, working-class students who grew up in middle-class areas maintained their parent’s view that going to university was essential; therefore, they experienced social pressure at home, by their peers, and in schools to consider attending university.
Alternatively, working-class students who grew up in working-class areas reflected that university was a choice; that their parents would have supported them whether they went to university or not. For example, one student reflected:

“My parents have always said that if we want to go to uni then we can, same as if we're to go straight into work or whatever. They’re fine with the idea of uni and just want best for us, just didn't appeal to them.” (W-C student who grew up in W-C area)

Taken together, these data suggest that habitus more so than class influences both the pressure and attitudes about a university education with PR and journalism students from middle-class areas feeling pressure to go to university (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Ingram, 2011; Willis, 1977) and working-class parents taking a more laissez-faire approach with less planning for their children's higher education (Reay et al., 2009).

**Research as Employability**

Generally, these data found that amongst PR and journalism students, working-class students are more pessimistic about having an equal opportunity for employability compared with their middle-class counterparts who tend to be more optimistic about employability. However, middle-class students who grew up in working-class areas communicated a more “working-class” pessimistic view of employability post-graduation compared to middle-class students who grew up in middle-class areas. Both working-class and middle-class students related that post-graduate employability is discussed at home and one common experience was that most parents, regardless of class or habitus, emphasized employability as the main factor for choosing a course.

However, a critical difference between working-class and middle-class PR and journalism students emerges in their views of research-informed education. Though research-informed education has emerged as providing a meaningful benefit to students (see e.g., Boyer, 1990; Palmer, 2014; Tallent & Barnes, 2015) in a system that is biased toward the middle-class experience (see e.g., Crozier et al., 2019; Ingram, 2011), our findings suggest that working-class students not only better appreciate practical education but also research-informed teaching. Specifically, our working-class participants communicated their interest in collaborating with their instructors and each other on research projects and action-learning research more so than did the middle-class students. These data also suggest that PR and journalism working-class students connected research-based learning to employability and communicated their interest in research as a way to improve their post-graduate employability. Conversely, middle-class students expressed less interest to be engaged with research during their studies but also articulated that research education helps to foster critical thinking. Thus, it suggests that there is not only a difference in interest but potentially anticipated outcome in research-informed teaching between middle-class and working-class students.

**Consumerist View of HE**

There were also critical differences in the core values emphasized that students reported growing up within working-class versus middle-class habitus. Working-class students reported that their parents emphasized hard work as the core value whereas middle-class parents emphasized kindness, respect, and honesty as critical core values. However, these values were also meaningfully influenced by habitus as middle-class students who grew up in working-class areas emphasized the value of hard work and like
their working-class peers reported having several jobs compared to their middle-class counterparts that grew up in middle-class habitus (see Bourdieu, 1977, 2007). For example:

“Work hard.” (M-C student who grew up in W-C area)

“Respect, forgive, work hard.” (W-C student who grew up in M-C area)

One of the critical differences in our findings with PR and journalism students, compared to previous research, is that while working-class students articulated the view that employability is an (if not the) end goal of their education experience, middle-class students also expressed this view. This communicates a different trend than what is recognized in the literature where previous findings suggest that the middle-class values education qua education (Hollingworth & Williams, 2009; Willis, 1977). It is not clear from these data whether this is unique to PR and journalism students or reflects a broader trend in England.

Our participants consistently articulated the view that they see themselves as consumers of education rather than learners or members of a learning community. There was indication that habitus or early socialization influenced this view. These findings suggest that as higher education is increasingly viewed as a commodity to be consumed, self-enrichment in education itself is not intrinsically valuable. This view is aligned with the government’s policy and the marketization of higher education. It is fair to conclude that the U.K.’s corporatization and marketization of its universities have aligned the perceived purpose of completing a degree with the neoliberal policies that have led to privatizing other state-owned services like rail transportation, water, and electricity. It is also aligned with a generation of students who now have completed secondary education and come to higher education after the 2012 tuition hike in England and Wales that saw fees for universities nearly double.

In this system, universities are liable to the Consumer Act and universities are seen as selling the service with students (customers) having rights similar to those normally granted in other service outlets. This view undermines the university system as a public good and the mission of universities to first enrich individuals and create critical thinkers instead leaving a neoliberal system that celebrates consumerism and places an emphasis on universities serving businesses and funding themselves (Lynch, 2006). Because these data found that the majority of students express the consumerist view, these data reject previous analyses suggesting that only the working class embrace consumerist values (Burchill, 2005; Hayward & Yar, 2006; Young, 2012) as it seems that the consumerism and marketization spans across classes.

Conclusions and Implications for the Higher Education

These findings provide an initial investigation into the possible effects of class among students enrolled in university courses in public relations and journalism in England, finding some critical differences between working-class and middle-class students on their views of the dominant model of research-informed teaching and providing valuable insights into the role habitus plays to inform student expectations and attitudes as they enter and navigate higher education. As a result, there are three contributions these data make to our collective understanding of PR and journalism education, class, and education design.

First, these data suggest that neoliberal policies that corporatize and marketize higher education may fundamentally change the value placed on higher education. The only point at which there were class or habitus influences evident in these data was in the finding that higher education is viewed as a commodity. Whereas previous research suggested a clear difference between middle-class and working-class attitudes about the inherent value of education that was inexorably tied to class concerns, these data suggest that education has become a mere vehicle toward employability rather than intellectual
development. Because these data were collected at a post-1992 university in the U.K., these may not reflect the attitudes prevalent at traditional research universities or “elite” institutions of higher education. Future research should further explore these attitudes and differences in the value placed on education. However, with proposed changes to higher education that would further stratify post-1992 universities compared to other institutions of higher education (BBC, 2021), it is possible that education reform may also further contribute to the commodification of education by students attending these institutions.

Second, these data demonstrate the importance of considering habitus and class together. While these data clearly suggest class differences exist, they also demonstrate that the identities developed within a neighborhood or community are instrumental in students’ views of higher education, their values, and views of research-informed education (Bandura, 1986; Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, future research on higher education in general, but especially in PR and journalism, should consider habitus as a critical factor or variable to account for differences in attitudes, evaluations, and experiences. Critically, these data found that on most topics the area (i.e., working-class or middle-class) that students grew up was a more meaningful predictor of their attitudes on education compared to traditional conceptualizations of class. Based on these data, we would expect middle-class students growing up in the working class to articulate views and values more common with working-class students and vice versa (Bourdieu, 1977; Ingram, 2011). However, this is a prediction that should be empirically tested in future research.

Third, these data refute stereotypes that middle-class students value intellectual pursuits more than working-class students. While findings did show that middle-class students value research-informed education more as a vehicle to improving critical thinking, the findings also indicated that working-class students would like to be involved with research and learn more about it because they view it as a way to improve their employability and social mobility. More importantly, these data suggest that all students—regardless of their class or habitus—at post-1992 universities value employability in their courses. Concerning the literature on Generation Z, these data also indicate that views of this generation as more activist and caring, and thus less consumerist, might be romantic and our data indicates strong consumerism and individualism. While individualism is seen as a characteristic of Generation Z (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), caring and being more sensitive did not come out of our data. Further research should explore the characteristics of Generation Z and their consumerist views in more detail using a large-scale study.

These findings, in particular, provide academics in PR and journalism better clarity on not only how students view and react to research-informed teaching, but also provide opportunities for academics to better relate theory, research, and practice to their students. In so doing, it can help these universities improve the evaluation of their courses of study (e.g., student satisfaction and employability) and improve their institutions’ reputations. Moreover, because of the parallels between U.K. and U.S. higher education, it is likely that similar patterns would emerge there; however, future research should evaluate the influence of habitus on attitudes about higher education and research-informed teaching in a cross-cultural context as well.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that in practical disciplines like PR and journalism, one important way to improve educational attainment in working-class areas is to highlight the value that the university or course can provide to their future employability and life opportunities. This may be one critical recruiting and retention strategy to reducing the attainment gap in LPNs and providing a more level playing field for those students as they enter the university. In so doing, an approach that supports the “universal design” in education (see e.g., Palmer, 2014; van Ingen et al., 2015) would also seem to remove much of the systematic potential for discrimination and stereotyping of working-class students that they
normally experience when entering a system created to support middle-class attainment. As such, we argue that this may also contribute to improving equality and diversity in the communication industry, which is presently dominated by middle-class practitioners (Parker, 2019; Waddington, 2017). Improving representation by the working class in the field of public relations will not only provide social mobility for working-class graduates but also likely improve the profession as well. Previous research has found, for example, that practitioners make unflattering assumptions about working-class consumers, which undoubtedly lead to poorer communication strategies with those consumers, potentially damaging their brands or offering less return on investment (Diers-Lawson et al., 2020). More importantly, by both understanding and adapting to the views and needs of all students, academics do not compromise the value of a research-informed curriculum but make it work for all students in a world where education is increasingly viewed as a commodity.

Therefore, to answer research questions, our data suggest that habitus or the area in which one grew up influences educational experience and views on research education by students who participated in this study. Research education is seen positively by both groups of students, and views of research education are linked to parental influence and most importantly an area in which students grew up in, either working class or middle class, rather than individual class origin. Therefore, habitus seems a relevant theoretical framework to explore differences between classes and how privilege gets perpetuated systemically.

This study provided readership with interesting findings that in some cases reject previous findings. The latter came as a result of the thematic analysis that does not aim to critically interpret data nor does it start from any particular critical stance. However, the limitation of this study is that it is a qualitative study using a small sample. Further research using a large-scale quantitative method is needed to confirm and further explore the results of this study.

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Middle-Class ‘Chavs’ From Working-Class Areas?


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An Exploratory Investigation of Teacher Perceptions of Education and Communication at the Beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Stephenson J. Beck and Emily A. Paskewitz

Keywords: K–12 educators, uncertainty management, communication overload, student-teacher interaction, online instruction

Abstract: In March 2020, teachers in the K–12 school system were forced to transition from in-person instruction to a variety of virtual teaching models due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This unprecedented change required extensive communication between teachers, students, parents, and administrators. This study explored communication during the March–May 2020 transition period, utilizing Uncertainty Management Theory as an overarching framework to investigate how teacher comfort with online learning, communication overload, administrative clarity, and student–teacher interaction influenced the effectiveness and happiness of teachers. Across these four variables, communication overload was shown to be a strong negative predictor of teacher well-being; student–teacher interaction predicted positive teaching outcomes.

Introduction

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic started spreading exponentially on the North American continent. By the end of the year, infection cases in the United States topped 20 million and reported deaths surpassed 346,000. Thus, the U.S. accounted for roughly one quarter of all global cases and nearly 20% of all global deaths. As a result of the surge in cases, school systems across the nation (and world) transitioned to online learning in March 2020 (Dhawan, 2020). Within a 2-week period, over 124,000 school buildings were closed, leaving more than 55 million students to navigate a new virtual education system (Herold, 2020). Although discussion across the nation would eventually focus on resolving
inequities (e.g., summer school, remediation; Kamenetz, 2020) and preparing for a future with social distance learning, the initial focus was how to complete the final 2½ months of the academic year.

Teachers played an important role in this transition, navigating a variety of different online educational approaches to continue instruction, provide assessments, and communicate with students. Juggling communication with students, administrators, and parents was essential (Daniel, 2020) yet complicated. Teachers were certainly at the frontline of the crisis, and the success of the pandemic transition depended in large part upon how teachers managed the uncertain situation. Importantly, the ways teachers managed their communication with students, administrators, and others, as well as their experience with communication technology platforms, has implications on how to improve these processes in future unexpected situations.

Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate teacher perceptions of communication and educational technology during the first months of the pandemic. Specifically, this study investigates a host of perceptual (i.e., teacher comfort with online instruction) and communicative (i.e., communication overload, administrative clarity, student–teacher interaction) variables and how they influenced teacher effectiveness, happiness, and work–life balance during the March–May 2020 period of the pandemic.

**The K–12 Teaching Experience During the Pandemic**

K–12 educators face many challenges both within and beyond the classroom, including negative perceptions from community members, reduced funding models (Lenstra, 2019), increased government accountability measures and testing (Shepherd-Jones & Salisbury-Glennon, 2018; Wright, 2019; Yastremski, 2019), and reduced parent and community involvement (Gilmore & Kramer, 2019). For these reasons (among others) K–12 education was in crisis before the 2020 lockdown (Gilmore & Kramer, 2019; Rudick & Dannels, 2019). The lockdown both revealed and exacerbated these issues. At the point of the compulsory lockdown, many school districts took an extended spring break to prepare for the change. During this time, administrators and teachers worked fervently to adopt and implement various online learning platforms and transform lesson plans to work effectively within them.

Pre-pandemic, educational policy researchers emphasized preparing for unfamiliar and uncontrollable future events by training teachers to be flexible and adaptable to uncertain situations (Gilead & Dishon, 2022). The pandemic has renewed this discussion as education researchers consider the new realities brought on by the pandemic, including the need to quickly transition between teaching formats, and have considered variables such as teacher agency (Damsa et al., 2021), technostress (Dahabiyyeh et al., 2022), and the Science of Learning and Development framework (SoLD, Rigaud et al., 2022). The present exploratory study attempts to continue this discussion by considering crisis in educational settings through the lens of several communicative and educational variables.

Uncertainty management theory (UMT) is instructive concerning the classroom and socioemotional variables relevant to this study. UMT (Brashers, 2001) provides a guiding framework for how individuals deal with uncertain situations, especially those situations that are unpredictable, complicated, and contain varying levels of credible information. UMT is often used in health and interpersonal communication research, but is also helpful in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, Brashers posited that communication is the primary way we manage uncertainty, and based on how we assess...
uncertainty and subsequent emotional responses, we can predict patterns of behavior (e.g., information seeking, information avoidance; Brashers et al., 2002). Since the pandemic was an unprecedented situation for school systems, managing the uncertainty of the situation, assessing incoming information, and creating outgoing information was a potentially stressful predicament for teachers. The need to not only manage the uncertainty and stress of the situation themselves, but to also portray confidence and comfort to students and parents was complicated. Importantly, Brashers et al. (2004) has found that attempts to comfort and support during uncertain times can both help but also potentially hinder recipients of the support.

During the pandemic transition to complete school during March–May 2020, teachers attempted to cope with many variables associated with uncertainty. These variables related to their interactions with parents, students, teachers, and administrators. Four are considered here.

**Teacher Comfort With Online Instruction**

The transition to an online learning environment required a certain set of software skills, skills that teachers may have known prior to the pandemic or would need to learn on the spot. According to Elgart (2021), 98% of teachers had to learn new skills to confront the online learning environment, and 70% reported that preparing online assignments required more prep time. In another study, over 92% of teachers indicated that they had never taught online before or had never received any meaningful online education training (Marshall et al., 2020). The necessity of acquiring new skills and adapting current curriculum and assignments in a crisis situation was rated as quite stressful, and many teachers reported missing normal school life. Additionally, some teachers simplified the transition by revising assignments during remote instruction to be based on easier information or previously learned material (Elgart, 2021).

The transition to online teaching may have been even more difficult for novice and student teachers (Delamarter & Ewart 2020; Marshall et al., 2020), especially since pre-pandemic student teachers had already expressed anxiety over online teaching (Poyo, 2016). Such teachers may have looked on the successful transitioning to online education as imperative to keeping or acquiring future employment. Not only may the transition have been worrisome for current employment and teacher well-being, but concern about the future of teaching may have added to stress about career ambitions (Delamarter & Ewart, 2020).

It is assumed that teachers who are more comfortable with online teaching would manage the uncertainty of the pandemic transition better than those who lacked such experience. Acquiring and understanding vast amounts of instruction on potentially unfamiliar software applications could certainly impact stress, anxiety, and uncertainty felt by teachers in an already difficult situation. Although familiarity with online technology would not eliminate the confusion, it could certainly reduce situational uncertainty and prevent teachers from feeling completely lost during the early stages of the educational transition. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

**H1:** Teacher comfort with online instruction positively predicts (a) overall happiness, (b) overall teaching happiness, (c) overall teaching effectiveness, and (d) work–life balance during the transition to online education during the pandemic.
Communication Overload

The amount of communication required to navigate the transition obviously increased for teachers during the pandemic. Teachers not only needed to adapt teaching formats and revise assignments, but they also needed to communicate information about those changes to many stakeholders. The need for teachers to receive and send messages to administrators, colleagues, parents, and students was essential to managing uncertainty related to the transition. With an increased amount of information, a variety of negative outcomes could potentially result, including burnout for all involved.

The quantity of messages is most often the focus when considering communication overload. In the pandemic situation, the number of messages and the amount of information channels could potentially be overwhelming. Since communication overload also involves message quality (Stephens et al., 2017), the inability to process and comprehend many instructions could be especially demoralizing: “Confusing or vague messages contributed the most to peoples’ perceptions of communication overload” (Stephens et al., 2017, p. 15). Both quantity and quality of communication can lead to overload and subsequent uncertainty, which can be associated with a host of negative outcomes. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

**H2:** Communication overload negatively predicts (a) overall happiness, (b) overall teaching happiness, (c) overall teaching effectiveness, and (d) work–life balance during the transition to online education during the pandemic.

Administrative Clarity

During the pandemic, administrators made important decisions to help with the online learning transition. For many teachers, administrator communication can be associated with stress (Wright, 2019); however, given the crisis scenario, administrator communication may have likewise been vital. Administrator instructions were potentially given multiple times a day through different communication channels and may have involved a good deal of qualification and revision (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). During the extended transition period, administrator communication with instructors increased in order to help all teachers navigate the unknown teaching situation. Since teachers working from home may have had limited access to normal interactions with colleagues (90% felt isolated and missed their colleagues; Elgart, 2021), the importance of clear instructions from administrators was paramount to managing uncertainty.

Increased communication does not necessarily mean helpful or clear communication. Administrator efforts may have been complicated by the potential amount of backchannel communication (e.g., among teachers, across schools) and the sheer amount of information and sources administrators needed to sort through to make decisions (Chen-Levi, 2020). The constantly evolving and changing situation would have required great effort by administrators to keep everyone on the same page. Such clarity of administrative decision-making and information dissemination would surely have influenced teacher preparations and subsequent classroom instruction. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

**H3:** Administrator clarity positively predicts (a) overall happiness, (b) overall teaching happiness, (c) overall teaching effectiveness, and (d) work–life balance during the transition to online education during the pandemic.
Student–Teacher Interaction

Student–teacher interaction is often considered the foundation of classroom instruction. Research has found that student engagement with teachers supports positive educational outcomes (e.g., increased engagement; Nguyen et al., 2018). Likewise, positive student–teacher interactions can help students handle and manage emotional or behavior difficulties in the classroom (Poulou, 2014).

However, the student–teacher interaction experience changed during the pandemic. Not only was instruction mediated via virtual platforms, but the opportunity for informal interactions, the ability to stop by before or after class, or the opportunity to receive tutoring before or after school was greatly impacted. Such adjustments would have negatively impacted students in need of those student–teacher engagement episodes, as well as force teachers to use unfamiliar teaching approaches to reach students. Such unfamiliarity may increase uncertainty, as teachers may not have the same confidence in using these different engagement approaches.

Additionally, teachers would need to communicate about the nature of the educational transition to students and parents. Without such interaction, teachers may find it difficult to assess and determine if students are struggling. Students and teachers that had stronger communication ties would have better opportunities to navigate the difficulties of the teaching transition. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

**H4:** Student–teacher interaction positively predicts (a) overall happiness, (b) overall teaching happiness, (c) overall teaching effectiveness, and (d) work–life balance during the transition to online education during the pandemic.

Intervariable Relationships

This study targets four variables (teacher comfort with online instruction, communication overload, administrator clarity, student–teacher interaction) and their influence on teachers during the transition to virtual teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As this is an exploratory study, the relationship across the four variables is of interest as well. Variables such as teacher comfort with online instruction and communication overload would seem to be related, as the ability to manage information intake would certainly impact whether a teacher finds the communication load to be too much. Thus, the following research question is posed to examine the interrelationships between the four predictor variables:

**RQ1:** What is the relationship between (a) teacher comfort with online instruction, (b) communication overload, (c) administrator clarity, and (d) student–teacher interaction?

Additionally, given the suggested relationships across these four variables, it is also of interest to know which variables are playing a more important role in respect to our four outcome measures. Although all four are predicted to influence the outcomes measures, it is important to determine which are most important when handling the difficulty of transitioning to online instruction. Thus, the following research question is posed:

**RQ2:** Which variables (teacher comfort with online instruction, communication overload, administrator clarity, and student–teacher interaction) influence (a) overall happiness, (b) overall teaching happiness, (c) overall teaching effectiveness, and (d) work–life balance the most?
Method

Procedure

This exploratory project is part of a larger study focused on teacher and parent experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data in this project focuses on teacher experiences during the shift to online only instruction during Spring 2020, including changes to instructional design and delivery, and additional communication between teachers, students, parents, and administrators. Given the novelty of the situation, a mixed-methods approach was selected, allowing the authors to reduce bias and gain a more complete picture of teacher experiences (Morris, 2017). Upon IRB approval, online surveys were distributed between May 18, 2020, and June 15, 2020, to capture teaching experiences as the Spring 2020 semester ended. Participants were contacted via convenience and network sampling. First, the authors utilized social media and personal email contacts. Second, the authors reached out to an education professor who shared the survey with their alumni listserv. All participants in this study were required to be K–12 educators and all participants answered basic demographic questions, along with communication variables the researchers considered relevant to the COVID-19 online teaching shift.

Participants

A total of 91 participants completed this project. The majority of participants were female (n = 84, 91.2%; male n = 8, 8.8%), with ages ranging between 23 and 65 (M = 38.36, SD = 11.89) and between 1 and 41 years of experience (M = 10.88, SD = 9.78). The participants were from a variety of positions, with 63 classroom teachers (69.2%), 19 physical education, art, or music teachers (20.9%), 6 special education teachers (6.6%), and 1 teaching assistant (1.1%). Participants were also from a variety of regions of the United States (Midwest n = 56, 61.5%; West n = 29, 31.9%; South n = 5, 5.5%), and most were White (n = 79, 86.8%; American Indian/Native Alaskan n = 8, 8.8%; two or more races n = 3, 3.3%; Asian n = 1, 1.1%).

Measures

Given the uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the survey questions were created by the authors for this project, with inspiration from prior research. The questions were created in consultation with an education professor who was familiar with the potential challenges facing teachers. The goal of this project was to explore a unique, time-sensitive issue that had not been studied before, resulting in the need to create survey questions specific to COVID-19 concerns. The resulting questions necessitated a mixed-methods approach, with both quantitative and qualitative analyses. For the quantitative questions, the authors knew the sample size would likely be too small to fully validate the scale items; however, reliability testing and exploratory principal components analyses were still conducted for each concept to ensure created items fit together. Final items used for analysis can be found in Table 1 and descriptive statistics can be found in Table 2.

Quantitative Measures

Teacher Comfort With Online Instruction. The first variable of interest was teachers’ comfort with online instruction. Three items were created, and a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was utilized. A principal components analysis with varimax rotation revealed a single factor with an eigenvalue of 1.92 that accounted for 64.01% of the variance. A subsequent reliability test showed acceptable reliability for the three questions (α = .71).
### Table 1
#### Factor Loadings Using Principal Components and Varimax Rotation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Comfort (64.01% of the variance)</th>
<th>Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I felt prepared to teach in the new online format.</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt comfortable with the technology being used with the new online format.</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had online teaching experience prior to the pandemic.</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Overload (50.77% of the variance)</th>
<th>Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Since the start of the pandemic, I feel overloaded with information.</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since the start of the pandemic, I feel overwhelmed with the amount of information I receive from administrators.</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since the start of the pandemic, I often find myself overwhelmed because technology has allowed too many other people to have access to my time.</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since the start of the pandemic, I waste a lot of time responding to emails and voicemails that are school-related but not directly related to what I need to get done.</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel overwhelmed with the amount of questions I receive from parents.</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel overwhelmed with the amount of questions I receive from students.</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am spending more time on school-related work than before moving online.</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrator Clarity (89.85% of the variance)</th>
<th>Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My administrators have been clear about teaching expectations during the pandemic.</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email correspondence from administrators has been helpful during the pandemic.</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since the start of the pandemic, the messages I receive from administrators are clear.</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Communication (55.88% of the variance)</th>
<th>Loading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I find it easy to communicate with students.</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are very responsible to my communication.</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students seem to grasp the online teaching technology quickly.</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am able to effectively teach my class.</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are reaching out with questions or concerns about class.</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2
#### Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Among Manifest Indicators (N = 90)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teacher Comfort</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>−.26*</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Communication Overload</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>−.23*</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>−.31**</td>
<td>−.28**</td>
<td>−.19</td>
<td>−.61**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Administrator Clarity</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Student–Teacher Interaction</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.63**</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Happiness</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Teaching Happiness</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Teaching Effectiveness</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Work–Life Balance</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *p < .05; **p < .01*
Communication Overload. Communication overload questions centered on messages received by teachers from students, parents, and administrators. Two items from Karr-Wisniewski and Lu (2010) were modified and included: Since the start of the pandemic, I often find myself overwhelmed because technology has allowed too many other people to have access to my time; Since the start of the pandemic, I waste a lot of my time responding to emails and voicemails that are school-related but not directly related to what I need to get done.

The remaining six questions were created based on communication overload research and all questions used a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Principal components analysis revealed two factors with eigenvalues above 1 which accounted for 59.67% of the variance. Factor one (eigenvalue = 3.05) was communication overload items 1 through 6 and 8, while factor two was item 7 only. Since item 7 (I feel the administration has sent an appropriate amount of information; eigenvalue = 1.08) did not load with the remaining items and overlapped with other measures, it was dropped. The resulting communication overload variable was reliable (α = .84).

Administrator Clarity. Administrator clarity items asked participants to report on the messages they received from administrators. The three items utilized a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) and focused on clarity of teaching expectations, messages, and the use of email for correspondence. The single factor (eigenvalue = 2.70) accounted for 89.85% of the variance. This scale was also reliable (α = .94).

Student–Teacher Interaction. In addition to teacher communication with administrators, participants also indicated their communication with students. Using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, participants indicated students’ responsiveness and comprehension of messages from teachers, along with students’ comfort with moving online. The principal components analysis revealed a low communality for one item: Students seem confused about my communication. This item was reverse coded but failed to load onto the single factor identified and was dropped. The final factor explained 55.88% of the variance (eigenvalue = 2.79), and the five remaining items were reliable (α = .80).

Outcomes. The authors identified four important outcomes regarding teacher satisfaction and self-reported perceptions of teaching performance. These four items were measured with a seven-point Likert type scale and included: Overall happiness, overall teaching happiness, overall teaching effectiveness, and work–life balance. These items were treated as single item indicators.

Qualitative Open-Ended Questions

In order to capture participant reactions to pandemic teaching, three open-ended questions were included in the survey. The first question asked about teacher communication preferences from administrators to understand how teachers and administrators were interacting during the pandemic. The next two questions asked about successes and failures teachers noted during the shift to online teaching. These responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common trends in teacher experiences during the COVID-19 transition. The authors began by individually reading responses to identify key participant experiences around the research questions. The authors focused on identifying occurrences that were recurrent and repetitive (Owen, 1984). After reading responses, the authors discussed emerging themes and achieved consensus through discussion.
Results

Exploratory Quantitative Analysis

Hypothesis one focused on the positive impact of teacher comfort with online instruction on four variables. Linear regression tests showed significant positive relationships with all four outcomes. Teacher comfort with online instruction positively impacted overall happiness (H1a; $F(1, 89) = 4.99, p < .05, R^2 = .05, \beta = .23$), overall teaching happiness (H1b; $F(1, 89) = 14.32, p < .001, R^2 = .14, \beta = .37$), overall teaching effectiveness (H1c; $F(1, 89) = 13.61, p < .001, R^2 = .13, \beta = .36$), and work–life balance (H1d; $F(1, 89) = 6.18, p < .05, R^2 = .07, \beta = .26$).

For hypothesis two, we expected to find negative relationships between communication overload and our four outcomes of interest. Linear regression results showed communication overload negatively impacted overall happiness (H2a; $F(1, 89) = 11.35, p < .01, R^2 = .11, \beta = -.34$), overall teaching happiness (H2b; $F(1, 89) = 7.27, p < .01, R^2 = .08, \beta = -.28$), and work–life balance (H2d; $F(1, 89) = 49.66, p < .001, R^2 = .36, \beta = -.60$). Communication overload did not impact overall teaching effectiveness (H2c; $F(1, 89) = 1.88, p > .05, R^2 = .02, \beta = -.16$).

The third hypothesis argued administrator clarity would positively predict (a) overall happiness, (b) overall teaching happiness, (c) overall teaching effectiveness, and (d) work–life balance. Administrator clarity had no impact on overall happiness (H3a; $F(1, 89) = 1.21, p > .05, R^2 = .01, \beta = .11$), overall teaching happiness (H3b; $F(1, 89) = .23, p > .05, R^2 = .00, \beta = .05$), or overall teaching effectiveness (H3c; $F(1, 89) = .82, p > .05, R^2 = .01, \beta = .10$). However, administrator clarity did positively predict work–life balance (H3d; $F(1, 89) = 7.58, p < .01, R^2 = .08, \beta = .28$).

Our final hypothesis assumed a positive relationship between student–teacher interaction and our four outcomes. The results showed student–teacher interaction positively predicted overall happiness (H4a; $F(1, 89) = 6.25, p < .05, R^2 = .07, \beta = .26$), overall teaching happiness (H4b; $F(1, 89) = 33.23, p < .001, R^2 = .27, \beta = .52$), and overall teaching effectiveness (H4c; $F(1, 89) = 59.96, p < .001, R^2 = .40, \beta = .63$). However, H4d regarding work–life balance was not supported ($F(1, 89) = 2.12, p > .05, R^2 = .02, \beta = .15$).

Research question one asked about the relationship between (a) teacher comfort with online instruction, (b) communication overload, (c) administrator clarity, and (d) student–teacher interaction. Correlation test results can be seen in Table 2. Results showed teacher comfort with online instruction positively correlated with administrator clarity and student–teacher interaction, and negatively correlated with communication overload. Communication overload correlated negatively with administrator clarity but not student–teacher interaction, while administrator clarity and student–teacher interaction were not significantly correlated.

Finally, research question two sought to find which variable of interest had the most impact on the outcomes. Using multiple regression, we found an interesting pattern. For overall happiness (RQ2a), we found a significant multiple regression ($F(4, 85) = 3.98, p < .01, R^2 = .16$) with communication overload as the only significant coefficient ($\beta = -.29, p < .01$). Overall teaching happiness (RQ2b) was also significant ($F(4, 85) = 10.62, p < .001, R^2 = .33$) with significant coefficients on student–teacher interaction ($\beta = .49, p < .001$) and communication overload ($\beta = -.20, p = .05$). The multiple regression to overall teaching effectiveness was also significant (RQ2c; $F(4, 85) = 15.39, p < .001, R^2 = .42$) with
student–teacher interaction ($\beta = -0.59, p < .001$) as the only significant coefficient. Finally, the work–life balance multiple regression (RQ2d) followed the same pattern as RQ2a where communication overload was the only significant coefficient ($F(4, 85) = 14.79, p < .001, R^2 = .41, \beta = -0.57, p < .001$).

**Open-Ended Question Results**

In addition to quantitative analysis, the authors thematically analyzed the open-ended responses from teachers on the survey. The survey questions focused on teachers’ preferred communication methods, as well as their perceived success and failures during the transition to online teaching. These ideas are summarized below.

**Communication Preferences**

Open-ended responses showed the majority of teachers ($n = 54, 58.70\%$) preferred email communication from administrators since the messages could be read when they had time, and they could refer back to them when questions came up. One participant noted:

> It's written out. If I need to look back and reference it, I can. There's so much information given out that if I know it's flagged or saved in my inbox and that I can re-read it as many times as I need to, it's helpful.

Some teachers also noted Zoom or video chat meetings ($n = 19, 20.65\%$) were helpful. Video conference meetings had many benefits: ability to clarify information and ask questions, everyone received the same information, and the full range of nonverbal messages could be shared. One participant said they preferred video meetings because “It's easier to grasp meaning and intent when I can read body language, facial expression, and tone.” Another reason teachers preferred video conference meetings was the ability to interact with others. The missing teacher interaction was available when video meetings were used: “It is nice to be face-to-face with Zoom meetings to ask questions, talk with other teachers, and do break out groups.” A few teachers requested both email and Zoom: “Meetings with accompanying email. Having a meeting (Zoom) and being told the information is a start. Then, having an email lets me go back and reread for information.”

Many teachers linked their communication preferences and the challenges of communication overload during the pandemic. Many teachers viewed email as a way to fight against communication overload since they could refer back to them when it worked best for them: “Even though the amount of emails is overwhelming, emails are the easiest form of communication because I can read and respond when I can instead of trying to set a schedule to call or meet with multiple people.” However, there were still problems with email. One participant noted:

> I prefer email or text because I can refer back to it. However, I get so many every day, something always gets lost in the clutter. I am usually an organized teacher, but I now feel out of control and helpless.

Many participants noted struggling to keep all the information organized due to the number of emails they received. One teacher shared:

> I would prefer a weekly e-mail that sums up the information I need for each week. I have been receiving multiple e-mails and texts a day, which is overwhelming. I do understand the
want to convey information as it is received, and also understand that others may prefer this method. I, however, feel better when everything I need is conveyed once a week. It is less stressful/overwhelming to me, but still just as informational.

The difficult balance between receiving information and too much information was common to teachers in this study. Participants suggested weekly emails instead of multiple emails a day, and brief messages with “good information.”

**Problems With Online Teaching**

Of course, when asked about failures teachers had a variety of frustrations. There were many comments about a lack of resources or support for the transition. Some teachers talked about the lack of administrator support during the transition, noting they received “conflicting or unclear information.” One music teacher even shared how “administration doesn’t know what to tell me because right now, I’m not a priority.” In addition, administrators made online teaching challenging for some teachers due to the removal of student accountability: “Our district informed parents and students they are passing no matter what, so numerous students have not turned in one assignment since March 16th.” Teachers also noted the lack of support from parents, noting parents “don’t support learning” and do not respond to emails.

Another challenge was missing student–teacher interaction. One teacher said that “I became a teacher mainly because of a desire to work with people, and that has been taken away,” Though teachers desired continual student–teacher interaction, many teachers noted it was challenging to interact with students. Teachers mentioned students do not engage or attend meetings, and that some had “fell off the face of the earth.” The lack of student–teacher interaction, and the inability to reach some students, challenged many teachers to the core who started teaching in order to connect with students. One teacher shared, “I have felt completely ineffective as a teacher in both instructing and continuing to build a relationship with my students,” while another shared, “I feel like a complete failure, and that is very hard for me. I pride myself in my teaching ability, but so much of it comes from student interaction.”

Finally, teachers struggled with technology issues. One prevalent technology issue was linked to socioeconomic inequality among students. Teachers in our study were very concerned about the inability for some students to receive any education due to lack of technology resources. One teacher summarized it this way:

> This [online teaching in the pandemic] amplifies the differences in socioeconomic status to a whole new level. Students who come from a supportive, affluent household are thriving right now, while students who come from the opposite are missing out; they are literally trying to survive and get by without access to the security and resources that schools provide.

This was a common concern from teachers, as they felt the move to online instruction, though required, disadvantaged already disadvantaged students. This was also echoed in comments about administrators who required synchronous class time when many students were serving as caregiver for younger siblings as parents continued to work.

Across the board, teachers were concerned about the quality of learning in the online format. Teachers noted administrator decisions made the process difficult. In one example, administrators created standardized lessons for all students that did not match student needs. The teacher shared:
Assigning one lesson for all students to complete that is created by the district, because that is not how our in-person classroom works. The lessons are too easy for high-achievers and too difficult for struggling learners, so I am left being required to assign rather meaningless work that has not resulted in a lot of student success.

Furthermore, many of these lessons were not translated or adapted for ESL learners, and as one teacher shared it made it harder for students to continue learning and to contact those families.

**Successes With Online Teaching**

When asked about successes during the transition, teachers indicated that in some circumstances it improved communication with students and their parents. The increased teaching responsibility on parents meant more parents reached out to teachers for help and guidance along the way. One teacher noted, “This opportunity has helped me develop stronger relationships with the families I serve. It really helps me see the whole child.” In addition, many teachers noted increased parental involvement in teaching, though this required larger efforts by the teachers to stay in contact. Student interaction also improved for many teachers. One teacher shared:

> I still get to talk to and see my students’ faces. Every once in a while they also send me memes and I feel like I’m almost back in the classroom. It has been a great way to continue education for core classes.

Teachers noted using technology platforms to connect with their students and maintain some positive interaction. A few even mentioned using these programs in the future even when face-to-face teaching resumes.

Interestingly, several teachers noted that in spite of the challenges with online teaching for some students, others thrived in an online setting. Teachers noted students who struggle with social skills could take a short break by turning off their camera and microphone, then rejoin the lesson. Others noted online teaching allowed students to become independent in their work which benefitted them. For example, “Some students that struggled before are doing great now. These students like being able to work at their pace and school is the pace of the class. Some students also get distracted at school.” Another teacher noted students who were not engaged in the face-to-face classroom were beginning to open up in the new online format.

**Discussion**

The transition to a virtual learning environment during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented move for public school systems. Past educational crisis research focuses on internal crises, rather than external crises, such as COVID-19, that impact the internal organization (Pashiardis & Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz, 2022). This exploratory study highlights some of the challenges teachers face when navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and found teacher communication with key stakeholders was crucial for managing the uncertainty associated with the last 2½ months of teaching in spring 2020. The exploratory results showed comfort with the new virtual approach and communication among key stakeholders was important to a successful transition. Additionally, the results suggest that communication overload and student–teacher interaction were particularly important for teacher well-being and teaching effectiveness, respectively.
First, on an individual level, the four variables influencing teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic all had some level of impact on the outcomes. For hypothesis one, teacher comfort with online instruction significantly influenced all four outcome variables. This comfort could have been associated with specific education platforms, or simply with computers and technology in general since most teachers have little experience with online teaching (Marshall et al., 2020). It is also probable that this effect was important initially in the transition. Given this project data collection occurred in May, teachers may have begun to feel more comfortable with online instruction. This was evident in some qualitative comments where teachers noted they plan to use some of the new technology platforms in their future teaching.

Communication overload was related to all outcome variables except for teaching effectiveness. Given that the other three variables are related to well-being and satisfaction, it suggests that teachers distinguished between how overload was influencing their teaching compared to their well-being. Communication overload may have negatively impacted well-being, but teachers did not believe that necessarily influenced their performance in the classroom. In other words, they could be miserable yet effective teachers, which is in line with the stereotype that teachers are self-sacrificing and put students first (Gilmore & Kramer, 2019). Qualitative data indicated preferences for weekly emails, which provide them a referent they could read and refer back to at a time of their choosing. Open-ended responses also indicated a preference for virtual meetings (which tended to be shorter), supporting the finding that communication overload was perceived negatively.

The only significant relationship with administrator clarity was with work–life balance. Administrator communication during uncertainty is crucial for clarity and building trust, and inevitably impacts employee satisfaction, the work environment, and successful navigation of a crisis (Pashiardis & Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz, 2022). Perhaps clear directions from administrators allowed teachers to clarify the boundaries between work and life during a pandemic. Administrator messages could have given teachers permission to stop working or care for their own well-being. Self-care was an important topic during the pandemic, and many organizations focused on self-care for teachers which may have carried over to administrator messaging (see Pate, 2020). Additionally, in line with the negative correlation with communication overload (–.23), perhaps clear communication does not mean more communication. Though past education research notes clear and constant communication as crucial for managing uncertainty (Pashiardis & Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz, 2022), this study's results show administrators that can provide concise, clear guidance may help teachers to not feel overwhelmed by the amount of communication (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020). Qualitative data indicated many teachers felt like they were not treated like a priority and did not feel they received sufficient support from administrators. In fact, several participants felt that sometimes administrators provided conflicting communication that undermined teachers' efforts.

Finally, student–teacher interaction was significantly linked with all outcome measures except for work–life balance. For teachers, the ability to connect with students is at the core of why many of them became teachers (Gilmore & Kramer, 2019), and the relationship between successful student–teacher interaction and positive outcomes variables in this study is consistent with past research (Nguyen et al., 2018; Poulou, 2014). Teachers expressed sadness when they felt that student interaction was lacking, even though it required more effort during the pandemic. The fact that student–teacher interaction was not aligned with work–life balance could be due to interaction requiring great amounts of effort and time on the part of the instructor. Although teachers did see some benefits to the online transition (creating better relationships with families, better format for certain student needs), others felt like they had failed their students.
In response to research question 1, correlation analysis indicated student–teacher interaction was not related to communication overload or administrator clarity. Since these latter two variables are not related to students, the lack of relationship is not surprising. If anything, it reaffirms the way teachers distinguish their multiple roles: involvement with students and management of work–life balance (Gilmore & Kramer, 2019).

In response to research question 2, findings revolved around the influence of communication overload and student–teacher interaction. Communication overload and student–teacher interaction emerged as the more influential variables impacting teacher happiness and effectiveness, although the impact is in different ways. First, communication overload negatively influences teacher well-being and satisfaction. The increased amount of messaging and the teacher’s ability to manage it seems to influence esteem-related issues for the teacher. Student–teacher interaction influences teaching directly and positively. Communication overload’s influence on teachers does not seem to directly impact students, but is related to the stress teachers feel through balancing their job and well-being. The communication that overwhelms teachers is not from students, but from other stakeholders, which aligns with past research (Gilmore & Kramer, 2019). Student–teacher interaction, on the other hand, did influence teaching effectiveness as well as teaching happiness, with teachers going so far as to say a lack of interaction hurt their teacher identity. Interestingly, teacher comfort with online learning was not significant in the multiple regression, suggesting that teaching effectiveness was not related to communication medium but instead was related to whether a teacher’s use of the medium created successful student–teacher interaction. Success depended on whether teachers were successful at communicating with students, not necessarily the medium being used to communicate. This may be connected to whether a certain medium is rich enough to permit strong student–teacher engagement (Thompson et al., 2015).

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

In conclusion, three overarching theoretical and practical implications are highlighted here. First, teacher success in the classroom seems very much embedded in student–teacher communication. Having such a relationship is important during a normal academic year; during a pandemic, it becomes even more imperative. As the theory of resilience and relational load (TRRL) notes, relationships and communication with others can moderate the negative impact of uncertainty on individuals (Afifi & Afifi, 2021). Though teachers maintain a professional distance with their students, both sides experienced the uncertainty of learning during a pandemic and were likely able to support each other through the transition. For example, in a study with college students during COVID-19, Kaufmann et al. (2021) found student memorable messages came from teachers offering emotional support during the online transition. When facing future uncertain situations, teachers who create bonds (and learning models that emphasize bond creation) with students will be better situated to navigate the uncertainty of large-scale instructional changes.

Second, successful communicative connections between students and teachers can plausibly be conducted through a variety of media. Just as studies have highlighted the media preferences for parent and teacher interaction (Thompson, 2008; Thompson et al., 2015), determining which media work best for students during situational changes may be an important part of the educational process during the first weeks of an academic year. Theoretically, situational contingency approaches may need to be built into school programming. Third, one of the most important steps an administrator can take in a crisis situation is to prevent teachers from feeling overloaded with communication. Administrators should
use email messages and structured Zoom meetings to provide teachers the information they need. Considering both clear messaging as well as monitoring the intake of messages from various sources may allow teachers to focus on teaching and reaching their students, which is where their happiness lies.

There are a few limitations to note for this exploratory study. First, the sample size is small. Given the difficulty in capturing data during a pandemic, we believe the sample size was sufficient to explore the variables of interest. However, it is important to put parameters around the generalizability of this study. Further research is needed to confirm the scales and findings of this study. Second, this study focused on the beginning of the teaching transition due to the pandemic. This very narrow sliver of time highlighted the frantic first stages of the pandemic transition, starting with the realization that there was a significant pandemic and ending with a complex, mostly remote conclusion to the academic year. Additional research efforts exploring the transition to a virtual teaching framework in Fall 2020 would be especially enlightening in comparison to the immediate changes in Spring 2020. And given the paradigmatic change in societal (and educational) viewpoints on pandemics due to the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to explore the many educational changes adapted in the aftermath. Hopefully educators are now better prepared for the potential uncertainty, but plausible reality, that such crises may be a regular part of the future.

References


Needs Assessment of National Communication Association Conference Presentations: Members’ Perceptions of Presentation Effectiveness, Values, and Challenges

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Keywords: academic conference presentations, process anxiety, performance anxiety, perceived effectiveness, needs assessment

Abstract: This study analyzed the National Communication Association (NCA) members’ perceptions regarding the effectiveness of their own and their peer presentations and the challenges they faced when preparing and giving conference presentations. Overall, participants (n = 187) feel fairly content with the effectiveness of NCA conference presentations and the value they have gained from them. The effectiveness of others’ presentations has a significant association with members’ perceived value of the conference presentations. The lack of experience and lack of confidence are key variables that heighten anxiety which can impact the effectiveness of presentations. Process anxiety was positively associated with presentation effectiveness whereas performance anxiety was negatively associated with presentation effectiveness. This needs assessment provides informed suggestions for making academic presentations more effective in the future.

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Introduction

Academic conferences are valued venues for disseminating and staying current on scientific knowledge or creative work, gaining feedback, connecting with potential collaborators, and advancing thinking, all of which can push forward a discipline (Byström & Schulz, 2013; Corwin et al., 2018; Jalongo & Machado, 2016; Tracy, 1997). For many, conferences are a vital part of their academic lives as they enter their academic careers, build and maintain relationships, or learn about funding opportunities (Biggs et al., 2017; Sousa & Clark, 2017). Across disciplines, the ability to present one’s work confidently and effectively at conferences can create a first impression that may lead to job interviews or new collaborations (Jalongo & Machado, 2016; Sousa & Clark, 2017; Tribe & Marshall, 2020).

While people attend conferences for various reasons and participate in different conference activities (Sousa & Clark, 2017; Wiessner et al., 2008), oral presentations typically take a significant portion of most conference programs (Neves et al., 2012). Arguably, the quality of presentations can affect attendees’ overall conference experience. Presentations that are engaging and stimulate dialogue could inspire new ideas, promote mutual learning opportunities, and facilitate a greater return on conference investments (Corwin et al., 2018; Neves et al., 2012; Wiessner et al., 2008). Importantly, “a scientific discovery is only as good as its communication” (p. 3); when presentations are clear or understood, there would be greater chance for critical discoveries to spread and benefit society (Abraham, 2020).

Ineffective conference presentations have been reported in various disciplines such as engineering (Lehr, 1985), library science (Byström & Schulz, 2013), nursing (Sawatzky, 2011), and political science (Smith & Salmond, 2011). Admirably, many communication scholars have conducted excellent work helping researchers in many fields communicate their research more effectively (e.g., Dudo et al., 2021; Luisi et al., 2019; Rodgers et al., 2018). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that empirically examines conference presentations at communication conferences. While sources abound in other disciplines that inform their novice and experienced scholars on how to present effectively at their conferences (e.g., Jalongo & Machado, 2016; Sawatzky, 2011; Smith & Salmond, 2011; Tribe & Marshall, 2020), our careful searches in communication-specific databases (i.e., Communication Source and Communications and Mass Media) yielded virtually no sources that inform our communication community members how to present at conferences. The limited attention on conference presentations within our communication discipline raises several important questions: Are presentations at communication conferences highly effective and in need of no further refinements? Are we implicitly expecting graduate students and new academics to understand conference presentation norms by themselves because they teach public speaking as their first courses? Or, in Tracy and Baratz’s (1993) compelling words, are we perhaps reluctant to “submit our own actions to the microscope we turn on others” (p. 300)?

We argue that the presentation quality at communication conferences deserves attention given that the study of public speaking is considered the foundation of the communication discipline (Bodie, 2010). Also, communication teachers should be equipped to model best practices of presentations (Byström & Schulz, 2013; Swennen et al., 2008). Therefore, this needs assessment seeks to understand: (1) the perceptions of the National Communication Association (NCA) members on the effectiveness of their own and their peer conference presentations, (2) the challenges they face in delivering effective conference presentations, and (3) the strategies for increasing the effectiveness of their conference
presentations. This is the first part of a research series that aims to offer informed suggestions for enhancing the quality of conference presentations both within the communication discipline and across the disciplines. This paper examines the general perception and presentation challenges of NCA members and another paper in this series explores strategies for improving presentations. NCA is a not-for-profit leading professional organization with a mission to “advance Communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry” (NCA, n.d.c). Since 1915, NCA has been organizing the NCA annual conference which typically attracts 4,500 attendees each year and between 1,100–1,200 total sessions (NCA, n.d.b; personal communication, January 4, 2021). The NCA annual conference plays a significant role in disseminating and advancing communication scholarship as well as promoting the professional development of communication scholars, teachers, and practitioners.

In the following sections, we first explain what a needs assessment is and why it is important for deriving audience-based strategies to enhance conference presentations. We then discuss the characteristics of effective and ineffective conference presentations and where NCA presentations fall within this spectrum. Finally, we review factors that potentially contribute to ineffective conference presentations. Guided by previous research, we pay special attention to public speaking anxiety as a major antecedent to ineffective conference presentations (Bodie, 2010). Research questions and hypotheses are drawn from this literature review.

**Needs Assessment Framework**

A need is a measurable gap between what currently is and what should or could be (Altschuld & Watkins, 2014). In this study, we are interested in the gap between NCA members’ current and desired presentation quality. A needs assessment identifies what the gap is, what causes it, and what should be done to reduce it (Sleezer et al., 2014). Assessment data are useful for creating a relevant intervention program, designing appropriate evaluation measures, and avoiding false assumptions or jumping to a wrong solution (Beebe et al., 2013; Lawson, 2015). Also, the process of collecting data, asking for input from all concerned, and letting them be part of the solutions helps increase their buy-in (Sleezer et al., 2014). Ultimately, a needs assessment helps stakeholders make better decisions about what course of action should be taken to effectively address the needs and further organizations’ goals (Charoensap-Kelly, 2018).

From this perspective, it is important to empirically examine the perceptions of NCA members on the quality of their own and their peer presentations and invite them to become part of the effort to enhance their conference experience. Without an understanding of where we currently are, what challenges we encounter, and where we desire to be concerning our presentation practices, it is difficult to pinpoint effective solutions. It is our time-tested rhetorical practice, dating back at least to Aristotle, to analyze the audience and adapt to their specific needs (Cooper, 1932). This needs assessment provides an opportunity for NCA conference participants to concretely examine and reflect on their presentation skills and practices. The results can reaffirm our strengths and uncover the weaknesses we might be overlooking, both of which can help us derive workable approaches for leveraging presentations at our annual conferences. Also, we can improve our teaching and training of students and professionals in our communication discipline.
Characteristics of Effective Conference Presentations

Identifying characteristics of both effective and ineffective conference presentations is the first step to understanding what needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of conference presentations (Jalongo & Machado, 2016). Previous researchers have described effective conference presentations as those in which the presenter is knowledgeable, well-planned, audience-centered, adheres to the time limit, and offers research-based recommendations (Jalongo & Machado, 2016). Also, effective presenters begin a presentation with a strong introduction that succinctly explain the research goals, follow a logical structure, conclude with clear takeaways, use language carefully, speak extemporaneously and enthusiastically, use nonverbal communication appropriately, and use visual aids effectively (Bulska, 2006; Lehr, 1985; Schreiber et al., 2012; Smith & Salmond, 2011). Ultimately, a good conference presentation should “provide an audience with information it can understand, discuss, and remember” (Smith & Salmond, 2011, p. 583).

On the other hand, ineffective presentations exceed the time limit, provide inadequate or weak supporting evidence, and fail to analyze and adapt to the audience (Jalongo & Machado, 2016). Other issues include unnecessarily long literature reviews, irrelevant material, ineffective use of slides (e.g., too many slides, unreadable text, poorly animated slides), reading to the audience, excessive use of technical terms, and convoluted conclusions (Byström & Schulz, 2013; Lehr, 1985; Smith & Salmond, 2011). Unfavorable presentations are also attributable to negative personal characteristics such as insincerity, arrogance, or being dismissive of participants’ questions (Jalongo & Machado, 2016).

Following the needs assessment model, it is important to identify NCA members’ current and desired presentation quality so that appropriate solutions can be recommended. As part of this needs assessment effort (reported in another paper), we asked NCA members to define effective conference presentations and the results were similar to the characteristics identified by scholars across disciplines as described above. Specifically, NCA members defined an effective conference presentation as one that is audience-centered, clear, well-organized, well-timed, has original, meaningful, and impactful content, and uses visual aids skillfully (Priddis et al., in print). Together with this understanding of their desired presentation quality, it is necessary to understand NCA members’ current presentation quality as perceived by presenters themselves and their peers. Hence, we ask:

**RQ1a**: What is NCA members’ perceived effectiveness of their own presentations at NCA conferences?

**RQ1b**: What is NCA members’ perceived effectiveness of their peer presentations at NCA conferences?

In addition to the perceived quality or effectiveness of presentations, it will be helpful to understand the perceived value of NCA conference presentations. The results can indicate the usefulness or worth of NCA presentations as perceived by NCA members. Thus, we ask:

**RQ2**: To what extent do NCA members perceive NCA conference presentations to be valuable to them?
Also, it is important to identify if NCA members’ perceived value of presentations vary by their demographic characteristics. This is to make sure that NCA presentations are equally beneficial and meet the needs of the diverse NCA membership. Hence:

**RQ3:** To what extent do NCA members’ perceived value of conference presentations vary by their (a) biological sex, (b) ethnicity, (c) academic ranking, (d) professional status, and (e) conference presentation experience?

### Antecedents to Ineffective Conference Presentations

In order to enhance the quality of NCA conference presentations, it is important to understand the challenges NCA members face when preparing and delivering presentations. In a needs assessment, asking the right questions is key to understanding the root of the problem without assuming what the problem is (Ellis, 2018). Along with an open-ended question that broadly explores the participants’ challenges, we consult the combined public speaking and conference presentation literature to formulate specific and relevant questions (X. Chen et al., 2015; Schreiber et al., 2012). Extensive research has shown that communication apprehension (CA) is a major barrier to effective presentations (Ayres, 1990; Bodie, 2010; Jaffe, 2016; Lucas, 2019; McCroskey, 1970; Pearson et al., 2007; Rothwell, 2016), thus we integrate CA into this needs assessment as a potential antecedent to ineffective NCA presentations. McCroskey defined communication apprehension as the anxiety associated with oral communication. The anxiety can occur when speaking in front of an audience, in a meeting, or amongst peers. Additionally, Jaffe (2016) defined communication apprehension as “the fear or dread of negative responses you might experience because you speak out” (p. 15). One form of communication apprehension is known as public speaking anxiety (PSA) which more specifically relates to speaking publicly. There are two types of PSA: process anxiety and performance anxiety (Jaffe, 2016).

#### Process Anxiety and Performance Anxiety

*Process anxiety* is specific to the stress associated with the preparation of the speech. This type of anxiety, also called anticipatory anxiety, takes place before the actual speech is performed and can show as physical (e.g., nausea or diarrhea before a speech) or psychological signs (e.g., the fear of dropping note cards when presenting). *Performance anxiety* concerns oral communication and delivery skills or potential problems during speech presentation (Jaffe, 2016; Keith & Lundberg, 2017; Lucas, 2019; Mörtberg et al., 2018). This type of anxiety is sometimes referred to as “stage fright” (McCroskey, 1970). Although it is perfectly normal to be nervous presenting in front of an audience, nervousness can be detrimental to the presenter. Performance anxiety can show as physical signs (e.g., sweating or shaking while presenting) or problems during the speech (e.g., helplessness, forgetting facts; Mörtberg et al., 2018). To understand the extent to which NCA presenters possess the two types of public speaking anxiety, we ask:

**RQ4:** What is the degree of NCA presenters’ self-perceived (a) process anxiety and (b) performance anxiety?

Previous research suggested that there are possible variables such as biological sex differences that researchers should consider when analyzing levels of process and performance anxiety (Bourhis et al., 2006; Lustig & Andersen, 1990; McCroskey et al., 1982). Furthermore, Blithe and Elliott (2020) have...
shown that academic rank and ethnicity can influence communication behaviors. Yet, neither study analyzed conference presentations. To understand whether levels of public speaking anxiety among NCA presenters vary by their demographics and to properly target an intervention, we pose:

**RQ5**: To what extent do NCA presenters’ self-perceived levels of process anxiety and performance anxiety vary by their (a) biological sex, (b) ethnicity, (c) academic ranking, (d) professional status, and (e) conference presentation experience?

**State Anxiety and Trait Anxiety**

Public speaking anxiety can stem from two major causes: state anxiety and trait anxiety. *State anxiety* refers to anxiety caused by specific situations (Motley, 1995). *Trait anxiety* refers to the presenter’s internal apprehensions regardless of communication situations (Daly & Friedrich, 1981). Previous research has identified various situational and personal factors that can provoke state and trait anxiety (Ayres, 1990; Beatty, 1988; Behnke & Sawyer, 1999; Clark, 1989; Harris et al., 2006; Hsu, 2009; MacIntyre & MacDonald, 1998). We explain them below.

**State Anxiety.** For state anxiety, we focus on three situational factors that are likely pertinent to conference presenters: the lack of preparation time, lack of experience, and audience response.

**Lack of Preparation Time.** With a constant pressure for academics to perform optimally in research, teaching, and service to advance their careers (Trower & Gallagher, 2008), limited time may be available to prepare for conference presentations. Anecdotal reports suggest it is not uncommon for presenters to prepare their presentations on the plane to a conference (NCA, n.d.a; Rivera, n.d.; Schlawack, 2017). Such limited preparation can heighten anxiety which may adversely affect presentation quality (Baccarani & Bonfanti, 2015; Behnke & Sawyer, 1999; Menzel & Carrell, 1994).

**Lack of Experience.** Research has shown that the novelty of the speaking situation alone may trigger speech anxiety (Beatty, 1988; Kelly & Keaten, 2000; Rothwell, 2016). For novice presenters, especially graduate students or new academics, their lack of experience and concomitant uncertainty surrounding the discursive practices at conferences may cause nervousness that results in poor presentations (C. W. Y. Chen, 2011; Hamisa, 2014).

**Audience Response.** Conference presentation is a communicative occasion rife with tensions, face threats, and face negotiation (Luisi et al., 2019; Tracy, 1997) while presenters and audience members co-construct their professional identities as academics, experts, and junior or senior members of the scientific community (Konzett, 2012). Whereas many audience members pose constructive questions or comments helpful for the presenter, some may use the discussion time to prove their own knowledge or stage-hog to their own end (Konzett, 2012; Tracy, 1997). Within this communicative dilemma (Tracy, 1997), it is hard to predict whether one will meet a supportive or antagonistic audience (Duff, 2010). As such, presenters may be concerned with unforeseeable questions or reactions from the audience which can increase their state anxiety (Ayres, 1990) and impact their presentation performance (Hsu, 2009).

**Trait Anxiety.** For trait anxiety, we focus our investigation on two variables that may relate to academic conference presenters: the lack of confidence and imposter syndrome.
**Lack of Confidence.** Self-confidence has been conceptualized as an individual's certainty about his or her abilities (Vealey, 1986) as well as a "feeling of assuredness and lack of anxiety" (Compte & Postlewaite, 2004, p. 1539). Self-confidence enhances one's willingness to communicate and achieve goals through communication (Clark, 1989). Research has shown that self-confidence is positively associated with speech achievement (Tridinanti, 2018; Salim, 2015), information seeking (Locander & Hermann, 1979), and listening comprehension (Clark, 1989). On the contrary, a lack of confidence is shown in one's reticence to speak and considered an indicator of one's communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1970). Individuals with low self-confidence often fear public speaking and may have a harder time presenting at conferences (Hancock et al., 2010; Raja, 2017).

**Imposter Syndrome.** Imposter syndrome, defined as "an internal experience of intellectual phoniness" (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 241) may also increase nervousness and make conference presentations particularly daunting. Revuluri (2018) posited imposter syndrome is prevalent among academics regardless of career stage. Importantly, despite outstanding accomplishments, one can still feel inadequate, and this feeling can be "deeply painful and damaging, almost paralyzing" (Revuluri, 2018, para 1). Past research has shown that individuals with imposter syndrome may compensate for the fear of being discovered as an imposter by working more, spending more time than necessary on tasks, and underperforming (Ramsey & Brown, 2018). Additionally, those with high levels of imposter syndrome experience high levels of anxiety and their feelings of inadequacy keep them from performing their best (Bravata et al., 2020; Kananiifar et al., 2015; Wilkinson, 2020).

The above review shows that ineffective conference presentations may be attributed to process anxiety and performance anxiety which stem from a variety of situational (state anxiety) and personal (trait anxiety) factors. To empirically examine the challenges NCA presenters encounter when preparing and delivering an NCA conference presentation and determine appropriate interventions, we hypothesize:

**H1:** Situational factors (i.e., lack of preparation time, lack of experience, and audience response) will be associated with increased process anxiety and performance anxiety which, in turn, will be linked to decreased presentation effectiveness.

**H2:** Personal factors (i.e., lack of confidence and imposter syndrome) will be associated with increased process anxiety and performance anxiety which, in turn, will be linked to decreased presentation effectiveness.

**Methods**

**Participants**

A voluntary sample was used. Participants (age range = 24–78, $M = 44.78$, $SD = 12.66$) included 187 self-reported members of the National Communication Association (NCA) from various divisions. There were 127 females (68%), 50 males (27%), and 10 (5.3%) unreported biological sex. On average, participants attended the NCA conference 12.44 times, ranging from 1–45 times. The participants reported various degrees of experience presenting at NCA and/or other conferences; 0–25 presentations (51, 27.3%), 26–50 (46, 24.6%), 51–75 (26, 13.9%), and above 76 presentations (42, 22.5%). Those who reported they never attended the NCA conference were automatically screened out of the survey. See Table 1 for more demographic information about the participants.
TABLE 1
Participants’ Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed race</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native English speakers</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>92.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>78.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>17.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Status</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Faculty</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>71.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners/Hybrid</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Ranks</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate students, teaching assistants, research assistants</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant professors</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate professors</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full professors or emeritus professors</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjuncts, instructors, or lecturers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other academic status</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment or Affiliation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal arts college</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community college</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private university</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public university</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>67.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedures**

This study is part of a larger data collection using an online questionnaire. After obtaining IRB approval from the Texas Tech University Human Research Protection Program (IRB 2019-563), participation was solicited through the authors’ personal email and social media accounts. A participation request was also sent via email to all the chairs of the divisions and interest groups of NCA. In addition, the call for participation was emailed to the authors’ communication professional contacts, posted on various social media related sites (e.g., interest group Facebook pages, regional communication conference pages). Additionally, a request for participation was sent to the NCA listserv called CRTNET.
Measures

**Process Anxiety and Performance Anxiety**

To assess public speaking anxiety, we used a shorter version (PRPSA-18) of McCroskey’s (1970) Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA-34). The PRPSA is the most popular measure used to determine public speaking apprehension with high scale validity and reliability. Mörtberg and colleagues (2018) examined the original PRPSA and found the shorter and more easily administered PRPSA-18 to be a credible option. The measure ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Two items were slightly reworded from the classroom presentation to conference presentation contexts. All other items were used in their original format. An exploratory factor analysis using the principal axis factoring method with the Promax rotation indicated the scale had two factors. Two items had cross-loadings and one item did not load in the proper factor, thus they were eliminated from the analysis. Another principal axis factoring analysis was performed yielding two factors with an eigenvalue above 1, accounting for a combined variance of 51.50% (process anxiety 44.96%; performance anxiety 6.54%). This finding is consistent with Mörtberg and colleagues’ (2018) study. Factor loadings ranged from .40 to .86. Both subscales had acceptable Cronbach’s alpha reliability: process anxiety (comprising nine items; e.g., “While preparing for giving a speech, I feel tense and nervous.”), \( \alpha = .91 \) (\( M = 3.42, SD = .57, n = 168 \)); performance anxiety (comprising six items; e.g., “While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.”), \( \alpha = .82 \) (\( M = 2.46, SD = .32, n = 172 \)).

**Presentation Challenges**

Drawing on an extensive review of the literature, we asked participants to reflect on their process of preparing and delivering NCA conference presentations and determine the degree to which they found each of the following issues relevant to them from *not relevant at all* (1) to *very relevant* (7): lack of preparation time, lack of experience, unforeseeable audience questions or responses, imposter syndrome, and lack of confidence. To capture all possible challenges without limiting the participants to these preconceived categories, an “other” option was also provided so participants could give an open response. The challenges were measured as separate single item variables rather than a composite variable so that the effect of each challenge on presentation anxiety and effectiveness could be examined and the challenges most relevant to NCA presenters could be identified for meaningful interpretation and intervention work. Measuring each challenge by a single scale item posed a limitation to the findings which will be later discussed.

**Presentation Effectiveness**

A modified version of Schreiber et al.’s (2012) Public Speaking Competence Rubric (PSCR) was used to assess participants’ general perception of their own presentations and other presentations they had attended at NCA conferences. The PSCR is one of the most reliable measures for assessing public speaking performance (L. Chen et al., 2014). The original PSCR consists of 11 items assessing five levels of performance from deficient to advanced. In this study, all core items were used except for the last optional item concerning persuasiveness because conference presentations are usually informative. Also, because this study aimed to understand the overall effectiveness of NCA conference presentations in general, participants were asked to indicate how often (from *never* [1] to *always* [7]) they met or observed others meet the 10 performance standards including appropriate topic selection, strong introduction, effective organization, use of compelling supporting materials, strong conclusion, careful word choice, effective vocal expression, nonverbal behavior, audience adaptation, and use of visual aids. These scale items
captured the key dimensions of effective conference presentations (i.e., the content, delivery, audience centeredness, and use of visual aids) as described in the literature review. The scale had high internal reliability with Cronbach’s alpha of .88 \((M = 5.76, SD = .43, n = 150)\) for self-presentations and .93 \((M = 4.43, SD = .39, n = 154)\) for others’ presentations.

Value of Conference Presentations

To assess the extent to which participants perceived NCA presentations to be valuable to them, they were asked to indicate their level of agreement from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) with seven benefits of conference presentations including increased knowledge, stimulation of critical thinking, enjoyment, relationship development, inspiration, time worthiness, and value for money. Participants were also asked how satisfied they were with presentations at NCA from extremely dissatisfied (1) to extremely satisfied (7). These items were drawn from previous research about conference presentations (Byström & Schulz, 2013; Corwin et al., 2018; Jalongo & Machado, 2016; Sousa & Clark, 2017; Tracy, 1997; Wiessner et al., 2008). A principal axis factoring analysis with the Promax rotation was performed on the eight items and indicated that all items loaded together on one factor, accounting for 60.68% of the total variance. Factor loadings ranged from .62 to .89. Cronbach’s alpha reliability of the eight items indicated a strong internal consistency, \(\alpha = .92 (M = 4.73, SD = .43, n = 160)\). See Table 2 for the complete list of scale items and their factor loadings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Factor Loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. NCA presentations increase my knowledge about the communication field.</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. NCA presentations stimulate my critical thinking.</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. NCA presentations are enjoyable.</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. NCA presentations help me connect with others in the field.</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. NCA presentations inspire me to develop new research.</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. NCA presentations are worthy of my time.</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. NCA presentations are worthy of my money.</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with presentations at NCA?</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Perceived Effectiveness of Conference Presentations

Descriptive statistics are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Intercorrelations among variables are presented in Table 5. RQ1 concerned NCA members’ perceived effectiveness of (a) their own presentations and (b) their peer presentations. On average, participants reported they often met the standards of effective presentations \((M = 5.76, SD = .83)\) and their peers met the presentation standards significantly less often \((M = 4.41, SD = .96, \text{paired } t[143] = 15.39, p < .001, n = 144)\). Also, perceived effectiveness of one’s own presentation varied significantly by conference experience, \(F(3, 133) = 3.20, p = .026\). Specifically, those who gave more than 75 presentations at NCA and other conferences \((M = 5.96, SD = .65)\) reported a significantly higher effectiveness score than those who gave less than 25 presentations \((M = 5.46, SD = 1.01), p = .045\).
### TABLE 3
Means and Standard Deviations of Participants’ Anxiety, Perceived Presentation Effectiveness, and Perceived Value of Presentations by Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean (Standard Deviation)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Process Anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (n = 36)</td>
<td>3.01 (1.36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (n = 93)</td>
<td>3.58 (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (n = 106)</td>
<td>3.47 (1.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White (n = 22)</td>
<td>3.25 (1.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic (n = 99)</td>
<td>3.56 (1.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner/Hybrid (n = 31)</td>
<td>3.08 (1.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Rank</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Students (n = 14)</td>
<td>3.58 (1.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct, Instructor or Lecturer (n = 10)</td>
<td>3.23 (85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor (n = 31)</td>
<td>3.72 (1.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor (n = 32)</td>
<td>3.58 (1.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full or Emeritus Professor (n = 25)</td>
<td>3.25 (1.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ESL Presenters</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (n = 125)</td>
<td>3.44 (1.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (n = 5)</td>
<td>3.49 (83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Presentations at NCA and Other Conferences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 to 25 (n = 34)</td>
<td>4.06 (1.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 to 50 (n = 33)</td>
<td>3.20 (1.40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 to 75 (n = 25)</td>
<td>3.20 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 75 (n = 27)</td>
<td>2.88 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall (n = 130)</td>
<td>3.42 (1.38)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All variables are on the scale of 1 to 7. Listwise deletion method was used for these descriptive statistics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4</th>
<th>Means and Standard Deviations of Participants’ Perceived Challenges by Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Preparation Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (n = 43)</td>
<td>2.81 (1.89) 1.70 (1.28) 2.84 (1.95) 3.42 (2.35) 2.51 (1.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (n = 111)</td>
<td>3.46 (2.04) 1.93 (1.44) 3.34 (1.89) 3.95 (2.29) 3.23 (1.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (n = 124)</td>
<td>3.27 (1.99) 1.82 (1.34) 3.26 (1.92) 3.73 (2.40) 3.10 (1.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White (n = 28)</td>
<td>3.21 (2.08) 2.04 (1.62) 3.00 (2.02) 4.14 (2.07) 2.71 (1.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic (n = 116)</td>
<td>3.40 (1.97) 1.86 (1.36) 3.33 (1.89) 3.86 (2.30) 3.08 (1.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner/Hybrid (n = 41)</td>
<td>2.88 (2.10) 1.85 (1.49) 2.85 (2.02) 3.66 (2.38) 2.93 (1.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Rank</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Students (n = 18)</td>
<td>3.28 (2.19) 3.00 (1.88) 3.89 (2.11) 4.89 (2.25) 3.67 (1.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct, Instructor or Lecturer (n = 13)</td>
<td>2.38 (1.66) 2.15 (1.99) 3.77 (2.35) 3.85 (2.44) 3.23 (2.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Professor (n = 33)</td>
<td>4.00 (2.29) 2.03 (1.40) 3.64 (2.15) 4.12 (2.26) 3.21 (1.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Professor (n = 36)</td>
<td>2.78 (1.61) 1.56 (.94) 2.89 (1.70) 4.03 (2.08) 3.03 (1.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full or Emeritus Professor (n = 33)</td>
<td>3.30 (1.96) 1.27 (.57) 2.64 (1.48) 2.73 (2.18) 2.58 (1.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL Presenters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (n = 151)</td>
<td>3.22 (2.00) 1.86 (1.39) 3.21 (1.93) 3.81 (2.31) 3.05 (1.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (n = 6)</td>
<td>4.33 (2.16) 1.83 (1.60) 3.17 (2.14) 3.83 (2.56) 2.83 (1.72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Presentations at NCA and Other Conferences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 to 25 (n = 40)</td>
<td>3.53 (2.01) 2.78 (1.82) 4.50 (1.99) 5.05 (2.15) 3.80 (2.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 to 50 (n = 38)</td>
<td>3.16 (1.88) 1.66 (.97) 3.05 (1.69) 3.82 (2.31) 2.82 (1.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 to 75 (n = 26)</td>
<td>3.35 (2.19) 1.35 (.98) 2.73 (1.82) 3.46 (2.12) 2.81 (1.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 75 (n = 39)</td>
<td>2.95 (2.08) 1.23 (.49) 2.21 (1.32) 2.67 (2.08) 2.28 (1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall (n = 157)</td>
<td>3.28 (2.01) 1.86 (1.38) 3.20 (1.93) 3.83 (2.30) 3.09 (1.91)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All variables are on the scale of 1 to 7. Listwise deletion method was used for these descriptive statistics.
Perceived Value of Conference Presentations

**RQ2** asked to what extent NCA members perceived NCA conference presentations to be valuable to them. On a scale of 1 to 7 (where 7 was the most favorable), participants reported an average score of 4.73 (SD = 1.21), suggesting an attitude between indifferent and slightly favorable. In addition, an exploratory examination of the data through a linear regression revealed that the presentation effectiveness of other presenters significantly predicted participants' perceived value of NCA conference presentations (β = .43, t = 5.72, p < .001), explaining 18% of the variance, F(1, 148) = 32.76, p < .001. A closer examination of the 10 presentation evaluation criteria revealed that topic choice (r = .42, p < .001) and audience adaptation (r = .36, p < .001) were the most strongly correlated with perceived value of conference presentations compared to the other criteria.

**RQ3** explored if NCA members' perceived value of presentations varied by their (a) biological sex, (b) ethnicity, (c) academic ranking, (d) professional status, and (e) conference presentation experience. Female participants (M = 4.95, SD = .99, n = 113) reported a significantly higher level of presentation value than male participants (M = 4.21, SD = 1.49, n = 44), t(58.32) = –3.05, p = .003. A series of t tests and ANOVAs revealed no statistical differences in perceived value among levels of any other demographic characteristics.

**Presentation Challenges, Speech Anxiety, and Presentation Effectiveness**

**RQ4** examined the degree of NCA presenters’ self-perceived (a) process anxiety and (b) performance anxiety regarding public speaking. Overall, participants reported a lower level of both types of anxiety. They experienced process anxiety (M = 3.44, SD = 1.38, n = 161) significantly more than performance anxiety (M = 2.48, SD = .99, n = 161), paired t(160) = 11.91, p < .001.

### TABLE 5

**Intercorrelations Among Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Lack of preparation time</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Lack of experience</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Audience response</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>–</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Imposter syndrome</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.74**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Lack of confidence</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Process anxiety</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.68**</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Performance anxiety</td>
<td>–.19*</td>
<td>–.27**</td>
<td>–.13</td>
<td>–.08</td>
<td>–.18*</td>
<td>–.03</td>
<td>–.29**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Self-presentation effectiveness</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>–.07</td>
<td>–.18*</td>
<td>–.04</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>–.04</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Others’ presentation effectiveness</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>–.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>–.01</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>–</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01
RQ5 explored if NCA presenters' self-perceived levels of process anxiety and performance anxiety varied by their (a) biological sex, (b) ethnicity, (c) academic ranking, (d) professional status, and (e) conference presentation experience. Female participants ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.33$, $n = 117$) reported a significantly higher level of process anxiety than male participants ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.33$, $n = 47$). However, their level of performance anxiety was relatively in the same range. No differences in either process anxiety or performance anxiety were found among different groups of ethnicity or academic ranks. However, academics reported a significantly higher level of performance anxiety ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.01$, $n = 129$) than practitioners or hybrid professionals (i.e., those in academia who also engage in paid consulting) ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .82$, $n = 43$), $t(170) = 2.63$, $p = .009$. No difference was found in their process anxiety. Finally, both process anxiety and performance anxiety varied significantly by participants' conference presentation experience. Those with the least experience (less than 25 presentations) reported significantly higher process anxiety ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.42$, $n = 48$) than the other groups with more experience ($F[3, 149] = 8.06$, $p < .001$): 26 to 50 presentations ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.36$, $n = 42$, $p = .003$); 51 to 75 presentations ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.08$, $n = 25$, $p = .032$); over 75 presentations ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.18$, $n = 38$, $p < .001$). Similarly, those with the least experience (less than 25 presentations) reported significantly higher performance anxiety ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.11$, $n = 47$) than any other groups with more experience ($Welch's F[3, 81.35] = 6.94$, $p < .001$): 26 to 50 presentations ($M = 2.17$, $SD = .83$, $n = 43$, $p = .001$); 51 to 75 presentations ($M = 2.37$, $SD = .67$, $n = 26$, $p = .016$); over 75 presentations ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .91$, $n = 41$, $p < .001$).

H1 and H2 predicted that situational factors and personal factors would be associated with increased process anxiety and performance anxiety which, in turn, would be related to decreased presentation effectiveness. To test these hypotheses, structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed using AMOS 25. Missing values were replaced with medians of nearby points. A confirmatory factor analysis was first performed to ensure the measurement model fit the data adequately and the results showed that it did: $X^2 = 420.89$ ($df = 268$, $n = 158$, $p < .001$), TLI = .91, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .07. The model comprised three factors: process anxiety, performance anxiety, and self-perceived presentation effectiveness. Standardized regression weights of all items were significant and ranged from .37 to .83. See Table 6 for the complete list of scale items and their standardized regression weights.

An SEM was then performed using the bootstrapping method with 2,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. This method was used to obtain both direct and indirect effects of lack of preparation time, lack of experience, audience response, lack of confidence, and imposter syndrome (independent variables) simultaneously through process anxiety and performance anxiety (mediators) on presentation effectiveness (dependent variable). In the initial analysis ($X^2 = 603.02$, $[df = 379$, $n = 158$, $p < .001]$, TLI = .89, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .07), lack of preparation time, audience response, and imposter syndrome were found to have no relationship with any of the mediators or the dependent variable, thus removed in order to simplify and improve the model. An examination of the modification indices also revealed that the model fit would be improved if a direct path was added from process anxiety to performance anxiety. The revised model (Figure 1) fit the data significantly better and, hence, was used to test the hypotheses ($X^2 = 494.82$ $[df = 313$, $n = 158$, $p < .001]$, TLI = .90, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .07, $X^2$ Diff = 108.20, $df$ diff = 66, $p < .001$).
## TABLE 6
Standardized Regression Weights for Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Process Anxiety, Performance Anxiety, and Presentation Effectiveness Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Standardized Regression Weights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Process Anxiety</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. While preparing for giving a speech, I feel tense and nervous.</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I get anxious when I think about a speech coming up.</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My heart beats very fast just as I start a speech.</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I experience considerable anxiety while sitting in the room just before my speech starts.</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I feel comfortable and relaxed in the hour or so just before giving a speech.</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I have trouble falling asleep the night before a speech.</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I have no fear of giving a speech.</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I do not dread giving a speech.</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I feel anxious while waiting to give my speech.</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performance Anxiety</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Right after giving a speech, I feel that I have had a pleasant experience.</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I feel that I am in complete possession of myself while giving a speech.</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My mind is clear when giving a speech.</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. While giving a speech, I know I can control my feelings of tension and stress.</td>
<td>.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. During an important speech I experience a feeling of helplessness building up inside me.</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Perceived Presentation Effectiveness</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Selected a topic appropriate to the audience and occasion.</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Formulated an introduction that oriented the audience to the topic and speaker.</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Used an effective organizational pattern.</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Located, synthesized, and employed compelling supporting materials.</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Developed a conclusion that reinforced the thesis and provided psychological closure.</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Demonstrated a careful choice of words.</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Effectively used a vocal expression and paralanguage to engage the audience.</td>
<td>.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Demonstrated supportive nonverbal behavior.</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Successfully adapted the presentation to the audience.</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Skillfully made use of visual aids.</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results showed that lack of confidence was significantly associated with increased process anxiety ($\beta = .60$, $p < .001$) which, in turn, was linked to increased performance anxiety ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$). However, lack of confidence was not associated with presentation effectiveness, directly or indirectly. Consistent with the analysis of group differences (through an ANOVA) described above, lack of experience was significantly associated with decreased presentation effectiveness regardless of speech anxiety ($\beta = -.28$, $p = .004$). Interestingly, process anxiety was significantly associated with increased presentation effectiveness ($\beta = .71$, $p < .001$) while performance anxiety was significantly and strongly associated with decreased presentation effectiveness ($\beta = -.81$, $p < .001$). Moreover, process anxiety had an indirect effect on presentation effectiveness through performance anxiety ($\beta = -.35$, $p < .001$). Putting together, H1 and H2 were only partially supported.
Other Challenges in Preparing and Delivering Effective NCA Conference Presentations

In addition to rating the extent to which the lack of preparation time, lack of experience, audience response, imposter syndrome, and lack of confidence were relevant to them, participants could choose to provide an open response regarding the roadblocks they experienced while preparing and delivering an NCA conference presentation. This allowed for all possible challenges to emerge without limiting the participants to preconceived categories and provided richer information for this needs assessment. Thirteen participants provided these open responses which could be categorized into three themes: presentation itself, audience reaction and evaluation, and room setup and technology. The presentation category ($n = 7$) included issues such as the limited time to address the breadth of the topic, the delivery style required, and the group presentation norms of specific NCA divisions. The audience reaction category ($n = 3$) included a concern about the audience dismissing the presentation or the presenter. Last, the room setup and technology category ($n = 3$) involved an uncertainty about how the room would be arranged, the lack of an audiovisual device, or the lack of technical support. Together, these themes represent situational factors that are likely to create process anxiety or performance anxiety shown in the quantitative data.

Discussion

This needs assessment examined NCA members’ perceptions regarding the quality of their own and their peer conference presentations as well as the challenges they face in preparing and delivering effective conference presentations. The results shed light on what can be done to promote more effective presentations in the future. This study had numerous implications for individual presenters, academic departments, universities, and conference planners both at NCA and other professional organizations.

Implications

First, the results revealed that most respondents were fairly content with the effectiveness of their NCA presentations as well as the presentations of others. In the same fashion, the respondents reported a range between indifferent and slightly favorable attitudes concerning the value they gained from listening to NCA presentations, suggesting there is room for improvement. Interestingly, the effectiveness of others’ presentations accounted for only 18% of members’ perceived value of conference presentations across the members’ demographic groups. On one hand, this small effect size informs conference planners that, besides the presentation quality, there may be several other factors that influence attendees’ attitudes such as the post-presentation discussions, the insightful comments from respondents, the ability of panel chairs to manage time, the panel climate, or the comfort of the venue. These are important elements to attend to and explore in the future. On the other hand, this effect size still indicates the meaningfulness of presentation quality; it is a clear and relatable presentation that often stimulates questions and sparks discussions. Presenters should still seek to prepare and deliver their presentations well, and our finding suggested that, at the very least, they should be attentive to their topic choice and audience adaptation.

Second, the results also revealed that individuals with more conference presentation experience reported higher levels of presentation effectiveness compared with individuals who gave fewer conference presentations. Through experience, speakers learn how they should present and how their presentations might be received. On the contrary, those with less conference presentation experience reported a
higher level of both process anxiety and performance anxiety as well as a lower level of presentation effectiveness. Contrary to our expectations, the lack of preparation time, audience response, and imposter syndrome were not associated with anxiety or presentation effectiveness. Ayres (1996) suggested that the general belief that little preparation results in anxiety is likely erroneous. He found those with high communication apprehension (CAs) spent more time preparing their speeches but received poorer grades than those with low communication apprehension. This is because the high CAs used ineffective tactics to prepare their presentation (e.g., preparing notes) compared to the low CAs who spent less time preparing but used more effective preparation strategies (e.g., rehearsing in front of an audience) (Ayres, 1996; Daly et al., 1995). Because the participants in our sample, communication scholars, had reportedly low levels of anxiety, they might use more effective preparation tactics despite their limited preparation time. This may explain why we found no relationship between preparation time and anxiety or presentation quality. Our nonsignificant findings on the effect of unforeseeable audience response (Hsu, 2009; MacIntyre & MacDonald, 1998) and imposter syndrome (Bravata et al., 2020; Kananifar et al., 2015; Wilkinson, 2020) contrasted previous research. Plausibly, measuring audience response and imposter syndrome with single-scale items did not allow us to tap into the entirety of these constructs and limited our findings. Future research should use more appropriate measures to examine the influence of unforeseeable audience response and imposter syndrome on conference presenters’ anxiety and performance.

Nonetheless, our results provide preliminary suggestions that an intervention to improve conference presentations should target individuals with the least conference presentation experience such as undergraduate or graduate students and early career scholars. Academic departments and graduate programs can assist in this effort by providing opportunities for advanced undergraduate or graduate students to polish their conference presentation skills such as through professional development courses, student-led training programs, senior seminar courses, and university-wide research symposiums (Clarkson et al., 2018; Olsen & Johnson, 2000; Sellnow, 2019). It can also be helpful to allow students to present their conference-accepted research and gain feedback from peers and faculty in their home department before presenting it at professional conferences. Additionally, given that many presenters start their conference presentation journey as graduate students at state or regional communication associations (Spruill & Bensoff, 1996), a joint initiative between NCA and state or regional communication associations (e.g., resource sharing, joint seminars, honors programs) can provide much-needed support for presenters to strengthen their conference presentation skills. A purpose of professional associations is to “encourage excellence and creative leadership [and] cultivate professional attitudes, ideals, and standards” (Scott, 1980, p. 128). Therefore, it would be helpful for them to provide their members (especially those early in their careers) with suggestions and techniques to lower anxiety and present more effectively at their annual conferences. Such an initiative may help professional organizations retain and recruit new members and promote participation in future conferences.

Third, the goal of an intervention should be to help boost members’ confidence and manage their anxiety. The results revealed that the lack of confidence can heighten process anxiety and process anxiety can increase performance anxiety which can, in turn, negatively affect the presentation effectiveness. Most notably, process anxiety was found to enhance presentations whereas performance anxiety was found to negatively affect presentations. Therefore, it will be beneficial to help members maintain a functional level of process anxiety and lower performance anxiety. Presenters should first recognize that a slight degree of nervousness before the conference is good as it can motivate them to prepare and practice well (Rothwell, 2016). However, they should be encouraged to start preparing early and actively seek necessary
information to reduce their uncertainty and keep their process anxiety in check (Witt & Behnke, 2006). As the qualitative data reveals, presenters may contact panel chairs or divisional program planners to find out about their allotted presentation time, preferred delivery style, audience’s expectations, room setting, or division-specific presentation norms before a presentation. They can also consult resources available on the NCA website and in NCA newsletters on best practices for preparing presentations (NCA, n.d.a). These strategies may help presenters alleviate their process anxiety before the presentation which would also lower their performance anxiety during the presentation. Further strategies for managing performance anxiety include, for example, viewing presentation as a communication rather than a performance, using relaxation techniques such as deep breathing right before the presentation, and using positive coping statements during the presentation (e.g., “I’m past the tough part”; Rothwell, 2016). It should be noted that some presenters may have panic disorder or social phobia that exacerbates their anxiety and negatively affects their presentation. In such a case, it may be helpful to present to a mentor to gain personal guidance about the nonverbal aspects (e.g., eye contact, vocal variety) and verbal components (e.g., organization, transitions, depth) of the presentation. In case of severe trait anxiety, presenters may consider using systematic desensitization techniques or seeking professional counseling (Friedrich et al., 1997). In sum, the ability to manage anxiety will help presenters feel more confident which can then improve their conference presentations (Bodie, 2010; Pearson et al., 2007).

Fourth, women in this study reported they gained more benefits from attending NCA conference presentations compared to men. This may be because women are more relationship-oriented compared to men (Baxter, 1986) and thus are more interested in attending presentations to connect with and support their students or fellow scholars. Conferences are social spaces where cohorts can come together and support each other in their professional and personal lives (McCarthy et al., 2004), and women may appreciate this opportunity to maintain those relationships. Another reason may be that women in academia tend to experience more microaggressions and hostilities and their professional behavior is defined differently from men (Blithe & Elliott, 2020). Biggs et al. (2017) argue conferences are a context in which gender norms are enacted and reflect the masculine normative culture of academia. As such, women may feel a higher necessity to attend presentations and be current on topics of discussion and recent research to increase their ability to advance their careers. These reasons may explain why the female participants perceived conference presentations to be more valuable than their male counterparts.

Fifth, female participants reported feeling higher levels of process anxiety than male participants. This is aligned with the public speaking literature which consistently found that females reported slightly but saliently higher public speaking anxiety than men (Lustig & Andersen, 1990; McCroskey et al., 1982). McCroskey et al. (1982) posited this public communication anxiety may “represent somewhat of a barrier to advancement of women within our society generally” (p. 133). In addition, women are often judged harsher on their communication skills and have to work harder at obtaining higher ratings of approval compared to men (Prime et al., 2009). This need for approval may be linked to feelings of anxiety. Therefore, female presenters may desire additional support to keep their process anxiety at a functional level and prevent it from becoming performance anxiety. It should also be noted that our data was collected in the summer of 2019 during which time issues of institutional biases at NCA and in the communication field were widely debated (Flaherty, 2019). Strong sentiment was that conferences perpetuated certain types of privilege and disadvantaged those from certain backgrounds. Indeed, many academic disciplines have also faced similar and critical problems (e.g., Foxx et al., 2019; Moody et al., 2013; Sarabipour et al., 2020; Tulloch, 2020). Although diversity and inclusion were not the focus of this research, the significantly higher level of anxiety among female presenters compared to male
presenters found in this study may reflect a deeper and broader problem at NCA. Oftentimes, a needs assessment can produce data related to other organizational issues beyond its initial area (McClelland, 1995). For these reasons, this research affirms the need for NCA and professional organizations to ensure all presenters, regardless of race, sexuality, ideology, or other aspects of identity, will receive adequate support, benefit from, and feel free to contribute their best at conferences (Tulloch, 2020).

**Limitations**

Some limitations in this study need to be mentioned. First, there was not a validation check to see if the participants were actual members or current members of NCA. A validation check would have allowed us to make sure the data was relevant and accurately reflected the association. However, a confirmation of membership would require personal identification and pose anonymity and privacy concerns, potentially keeping participants from responding freely and honestly. Second, this study only focused on the perceived effectiveness and value of conference presentations; it did not capture the overall conference experience. However, as the data revealed, there might be other broader factors that affected the delivery or evaluation of conference presentations that we did not account for such as communicator styles, organizational climate, and section/division/caucus culture. Third, the sample was rather small compared to the average number of attendees in the NCA annual conference ($N = 4,500$) and might not be parallel to the overall NCA membership. Future research should use a larger sample size and include more participants from underrepresented groups from the various interest groups and divisions. With a larger and more diverse sample, future researchers can examine more concretely if and how perceptions about conference presentations vary by interest groups and participants’ backgrounds. Fourth, we measured biological sex in this study because previous research found biological sex differences in public speaking anxiety scores (Lustig & Andersen, 1990; McCroskey et al., 1982). However, “any findings linking anxiety to biological sex are very difficult to explain biologically” (McCroskey et al., 1982, p. 129) and the differences found in the current study may be confounded by gender roles which are socially constructed. Future studies should examine both biological sexes and gender orientations to understand their influences on conference presentations more fully.

**Future Research**

In the future, researchers should analyze cultural differences and/or language barriers that might affect perceptions regarding conference presentations. Language barriers may prevent some non-native English presenters from communicating effectively both verbally and nonverbally. This may heighten their public speaking anxiety compared to native English speakers (Alemi et al., 2011). X. L. Chen and Zhang (2004) noted that second-language speakers are more anxious for fear of being evaluated negatively by audience members, which then affects the speakers’ self-esteem and presentation performance. These negative effects may be even more profound among presenters at international conferences whose English may be the third or fourth language.

Additionally, there are different aspects of academic conferences that can be explored more deeply through communication theories. For example, researchers may employ coordinated management of meaning theory (Pearce & Cronen, 1980) to understand how conference attendees in each discipline co-create meanings, codes of conduct, presentation norms, or gendered norms. Researchers may also use social exchange theory (Roloff, 1981) to understand how conference attendees calculate the cost-benefit ratio of attending and presenting at conferences. In addition, researchers might investigate the
relationship between self-efficacy and overconfidence (i.e., the difference between a person's expected performance and his or her actual performance) among conference presenters regarding their perceived presentation quality (Moores & Chang, 2009). Previous research has shown high self-efficacy can lead to overconfidence, relaxation, and lower performance over time (Vancouver et al., 2001, 2002). Compared to scholars in other disciplines, communication professors are likely to have higher self-efficacy regarding public speaking and perhaps feel so confident in our skill set to speak almost off the cuff. However, since the participants rated their own presentation performance more favorably than their peers, it would be interesting to examine if and to what extent their self- versus peer-performance ratings are influenced by their self-efficacy and overconfidence (Moores & Chang, 2009). Attribution theory (Heider, 1958) may also serve as a fruitful lens for further investigating this phenomenon.

Moreover, future studies can explore ways to make presentations more accessible for both presenters as well as listeners with disabilities. Recently, Dr. Isaac West at Vanderbilt University has made a commendable effort in assembling and distributing an online shared document listing best practices for accessible conference presentations and allowing others to add ideas and techniques to them (West, n.d.). This is helpful for making NCA presentations both effective and accommodating which helps foster an inclusive and supportive climate for all members. Empirical research can be further conducted to provide informed recommendations to support presenters with disabilities.

This research focused on formal paper presentations because they are currently the majority of presentations at NCA. However, in recent years, NCA has created alternative types of presentations such as Scholar-to-Scholar presentations where participants display their work using creative posters, digital slides, and other media while having informal conversations with other scholars in attendance. At many conferences, alternative formats (e.g., high-density sessions or speed-date roundtables, etc.) are also the main activities. Future research should examine the perception of these alternative presentation formats, measure presenters’ self-perceived anxiety over these more informal sessions, and investigate how these innovative formats may affect attendees’ perceptions of the overall conference experience.

Next, individuals attend conferences for different reasons and their motivations may influence their own presentation performance or perception of others’ presentations (Sousa & Clark, 2017). Future research can examine various goals (e.g., networking, continued learning, career advancement, impression management) and their moderating effect in the relationship between presentation effectiveness and perceived value of presentations. Gratification may also serve as another moderator and researchers may explore how gratification from supporting others or serving in a leadership role at a conference, for instance, influences one's overall conference experience.

In addition, future research might compare communication conferences to conferences from other disciplines to see if the same behaviors exist and examine various ways to help speakers. For instance, NCA members in this study reported low levels of anxiety. This may be because many NCA members, mostly communication professors, teach public speaking skills in the classroom and are perhaps more comfortable speaking publicly. Future researchers can compare NCA members’ levels of anxiety to those of other disciplines (e.g., computer science, engineering, etc.) and explore if presenters at NCA and other disciplines can benefit from the same or different kinds of assistance for enhancing conference presentation skills.
Last, this data was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly moved academic conferences online and forced organizers to rethink their in-person events (Kim, 2020). Because many criteria for determining an effective presentation are the same whether it is delivered face-to-face or online (e.g., audience-centeredness, well-organized content, clarity, engaging delivery, time management), the results from this needs assessment would still apply to the post-COVID era. Nonetheless, the pandemic has created new challenges that call for research attention. For instance, the need to navigate web-conferencing technologies, the limited nonverbal feedback from the audience, the comfort of presenting from home, the ability to engage with audience members real-time via chat messages, or the larger audiences due to zero travel cost may increase or decrease presenters’ process or performance anxiety which affects the quality of presentations. These new dynamics may also impact attendees’ perceived value of conference presentations. As virtual conferences will likely stay at least for the next several years, future researchers may explore how conference attendees assess the quality and value of virtual conference presentations.

Conclusion

Conferences are a vital part of academic life. Although people have different personal reasons for attending conferences (Sousa & Clark, 2017), knowledge sharing is arguably the main activity of most conferences (Neves et al., 2012). Indeed, the recent controversies surrounding racism in professional organizations, the foreseeable changes in conferences post COVID-19, or the push for more interactive, innovative presentation formats, all seem to indicate there are many more pressing issues than improving the quality of oral presentations. Nevertheless, to maximize the benefit for those attending and listening to conference presentations, the ability to present relevant content clearly and confidently is still critical whether the presentation is delivered face-to-face, online, or in an informal format. Unless something is done, ineffective presentations will continue to be the norm of academic conferences (Laist, 2017; Lehr, 1985).

This needs assessment suggested many nuanced and important implications that individual presenters, academic departments, universities, and conference organizers can use to further leverage conference presentations. The lack of experience and lack of confidence are key variables that heighten anxiety which can impact the effectiveness of conference presentations. Individuals with the least conference presentation experience, particularly those in their early career stages, could benefit the most from an intervention that helps boost their confidence and manage their process and performance anxiety. Also, strategies should be developed to ensure presenters of all backgrounds will receive adequate support to lower their anxiety and feel free to contribute their best at conferences.

What would an academic conference be like if attendees left every presentation session feeling satisfied with new learning, energized to spread the new knowledge, and inspired to develop new studies? As the study of public speaking is considered the foundation of our communication discipline (Bodie, 2010), producing these results and improving conference presentations across disciplines is highly pertinent to communication teachers and researchers. The first step toward that ambitious goal is within our own discipline.
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Sounds About White: Critiquing the NCA Standards for Public Speaking Competency

Adam Key

Keywords: Whiteness, public speaking, basic course, critical pedagogy, critical discourse, instructional communication

Abstract: Using critical discourse analysis, I critically examined the National Communication Association’s (NCA) standards for public speaking competency to determine what type of ideal speaker the standards would produce. Highlighting NCA’s emphasis on “suitable” and “appropriate” forms of communication and the use of Standard American English, I argue that the ideal competent speaker in our classrooms sounds White. I complete the essay by reimagining the basic course using methods of Africana Study to explore ways that the standards for public speaking might be decolonized and made more inclusive to students of all backgrounds.

Introduction

The Communication discipline has, as of late, made significant progress in both the recognition and response to racial inequities and embedded systemic racism within its organizations, members, research, and pedagogical practices. Among these are the fundamental changes to how the National Communication Association (NCA) selects its Distinguished Scholars, the formation of the Communication Scholars for Transformation social media group in response to Martin Medhurt’s proposed editorial in Rhetoric & Public Affairs, and social media movements and articles including #CommunicationSoWhite and #RhetoricSoWhite. While this progress is both admirable and necessary, the changes implemented have severely neglected one crucial area. In order to elucidate this absence, I take the unusual path not to traverse the pages of disciplinary journals, but by going down to South Park.
In the “Quest for Ratings” (Parker, 2004) episode of the popular adult animation show, the main characters attempted to revise their student news television program in order to raise their viewership after the school threatened cancellation due to low ratings. In order to compete against their main opposition, a goofy program featuring young animals filmed with a wide-angle lens, they devised a means to appeal to more of the student body. The “Quest for Ratings” episode parodied the many ways news agencies promote offensive stereotypes in order to appeal to biases of their viewers. For the purposes of this essay, one exchange is most salient.

Eric Cartman, the proverbial bully of the main characters who is well-known for regularly making racist and sexist remarks, became the de facto leader of the student news program. After a meeting to discuss ideas to raise ratings, which included changing the name of the show from “Super School News” to “Sexy Action School News” and making up false stories about celebrities, Cartman privately approached the student weatherman, Token Black. As his name might suggest, Black is the only character on the show of African descent. During the conversation, the following exchange took place:

Cartman: Look, Token, I know the guys are having trouble bringing this up with you—but the thing is, Token, we really need to revamp your whole TV persona.

Black: Huh?

Cartman: You see, Token, people really enjoy seeing African Americans on the news. Seeing African Americans on the news, not hearing them. That’s why all African American news people learn to talk more—how should I say?—White.

Black: (awkward, wide-eyed pause)

Cartman: Token, all the great African American newspeople have learned to hide their Ebonic tribespeak with a more pure Caucasian dialect. There’s no shame in it, and I really think it will help our ratings. (Parker, 2004)

When Token is next shown on-screen, moments later as part of the newscast, he has abandoned his usual voice and uses one stereotypical of White American newscasters.

I chose this example for two reasons. First, despite a long history of employing fantastic and farcical tropes in order to critique larger societal issues in a comedic manner digestible to their audience, many might consider a South Park reference inappropriate for the pages of an academic journal. Second, the manner in which Token spoke at the end of the exchange is nearly identical to the demands placed on students in Public Speaking classrooms. Both reasons go to the central aim of this essay: to expose the discipline’s material investment in normalizing Whiteness through policing speech. While South Park critiqued the racist practice by making the demand for White speech from Black mouths blatant, in our classrooms, it is rarely this visible. With that critical spirit in mind, I seek to examine the manner in which BIPOC students are demanded to speak in college and university classrooms.

To engage with this goal, I conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Patton, 2014) on two documents produced by the NCA: “Speaking and Listening Competencies for College Students” (Morreale et al., 1998) and “The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form and Manual” (Morreale et al., 2007). These texts were chosen for analysis given their and the NCA’s ability to shape curricular
standards in Public Speaking classrooms. Where previous studies have examined the racialized content of Communication textbooks (i.e., Clasen & Lee, 2006; Manning, 2020), there is a significant variety of textbook choices available. Further, the NCA’s hegemonic presence within the discipline likely means that textbook authors and publishers are taking their cues from its standards. Additionally, while these are older documents, they both still bear the standard of the NCA and their lack of revision speaks to the organization’s commitment to diversity.

The organization produces over half the published research in the discipline, more than the International Communication Association and all U.S. regional associations combined (Rains et al., 2020). In addition to its dominance, the NCA is also extremely White, particularly in relation to its pedagogical research. Scholarship in NCA journals is overwhelmingly produced by White scholars and from White perspectives. In Chakravartty and colleagues’ (2018) groundbreaking article, they provided statistics related to the racial aspects of NCA journals. Communication Education, the organization’s primary journal for pedagogical research, was at or near the bottom in every category. It had only 8% BIPOC first authors, the fifth lowest; 6% BIPOC editorial board members, tied with Communication Monographs for the second lowest; and despite having the third highest number of articles published, it tied with the Quarterly Journal of Speech for the lowest race-related keywords in paper descriptions at only 1%. Based on a comparison of articles and episodes, South Park has published more critiques of racism, both in percentage and raw numbers, than Communication Education.

Mukherjee (2020) argued, “In light of the sheer volume of critiques that critical race scholars have offered against the [W]hiteness of the canon, we cannot but conclude that the field remains so [W]hite because something/someone is deliberately keeping it so” (p. 4). According to Houdek (2018), Whiteness is kept the standard in the discipline through “a taken-for-granted system that protects its own interests and beneficiaries through everyday habits and routines, most of which seem benign and unintentional to those who carry them out” (p. 294). The pedagogical practices of the Public Speaking classroom maintain “the structural and ideological apparatuses of white privilege by rendering such privilege invisible” (Mukherjee, 2020, p. 2). To date, there has been no published analysis of the NCA standards for Public Speaking. Further, the reform movement has substantially missed thebasic course. While there is #CommunicationSoWhite and #RhetoricSoWhite, there is not yet #SpeakingSoWhite. My analysis focuses on the hidden ways “power is used to ‘other’ particular students” (Patton, 2014, p. 725). Specifically, I argue that the NCA standards for competency in speech demand that all students perform White speech. In addition, I explore, through the lens of Applied Africana Studies, what an inclusive and liberatory public speaking pedagogy might look like. In doing so, I hope to both expose the discursive Whiteness underlying public speaking standards as well as provide direction for a more inclusive pedagogy.

**History of the Present**

While the study of speech and communication did not develop into a specific and separate field until the discipline split from English in 1917, instruction in public speaking is significantly older. Historical records indicate that as early as the colonial period, students took classes in how to give speeches (Delia, 1987). Speech courses then, however, bear little resemblance to their modern counterparts.

According to Cohen (1994), those who taught the earliest speech classes held to the belief that “students who took speech courses needed to learn how to become responsible and active citizens who understood
the power of language” (p. 135). Roberts (1996) noted that “the purpose of a college education at this point was to produce a virtuous, decent person, capable of speaking both in civic duties and in the professions (law and ministry)” (p. 301). While students were certainly instructed in the means to give a speech, the curriculum did not end there. It was not enough for students to know how to speak, but to have something substantial to speak about.

From the 18th to the 19th centuries, American speech courses began to drastically transform from a focus on the art of rhetoric to a focus on elocution. Keith (2007) explained these changes were due to factors primarily including

the rise of aestheticism, perceived decline in the speaking ability of college graduates and the elocutionist response, the growing need for political orators, the growth of a politically empowered middle class, and the disengagement of rhetoric instruction from its contexts of application. (p. 24)

Whereas the previous instruction had treated speaking as an art, elocution, influenced by the work of Francoise Delsarte (Cohen, 1994) treated it as a science.

The Delsarte System of Oratory was “a complex oratory system which embodied the characteristics of philosophy and science” (Roberts, 1996, p. 299). As speaking, under Delsarte, was viewed as a science rather than an art, the system’s adherents believed that specific actions within speeches would, akin to scientific laws, produce the same results every time they were employed. The system “provided charts, diagrams, and illustrations depicting the theory, on how to position parts of the body, the right eyebrow arch, the wrist movement, and torso movement” (Roberts, 1996, p. 299).

With the rise of elocution, gone were the days in which students were instructed as to how they might engage as members of a democratic society. In place of lessons on civic engagement, public speaking courses became a form of vocational training where students would learn the skill and trade of oratory. “A skills orientation to speech encouraged students to emphasize those skills regarded as valuable or marketable” and such classes were deemed useful only as much as they trained students for careers in the “pulpit, platform, and courtroom” (Chawla & Rodriguez, 2011, p. 82).

Richard Weaver (1948) critiqued similar pedagogical developments in composition courses in his essay, To Write The Truth. While composition and public speaking are certainly distinct courses, their shared history and pedagogical similarity are notable. Weaver himself used the terms “speaking” and “writing” interchangeably throughout his essay. Given the comparability, Weaver’s (1948) critiques become exceedingly relevant when critically examining the development of public speaking pedagogy. Referring to the practice as “making speech the harlot of the arts” (p. 27), Weaver (1948) noted that the goals of instruction have shifted from “speaking truthfully to speaking correctly to speaking usefully” (p. 28). It is this shift in public speaking pedagogy to the emphasis that students speak usefully that has placed public speaking within the basic required coursework at the majority of colleges and universities.

Since the late 1980s, most colleges and universities have required that all students take a basic communication course, typically public speaking. The ubiquitous presence of this course is due, in large part, to the demand of employers that new hires be able to communicate effectively (Roberts, 1996). As Weaver (1948) noted, students are being taught how to speak usefully. “This practical application of public speaking takes precedence over personal development. Therefore, students focus on organization,
structure, and developing logical substantive outlines. Students should also be poised, confident, and articulate with minimum verbal fillers” (Roberts, 1996, p. 303).

While communication scholars might claim that the discipline has evolved from elocution, these emphases speak to the contrary. Public speaking courses, as they exist in the general curriculum, are taught in very much the same spirit as the elocutionist movement. Where the rest of the courses offered within the discipline have evolved in pace with current research, the manner in which public speaking is taught remained stagnant. Leff (1992) noted that, for graduate students in rhetoric, “the curriculum bears only a generic resemblance to what I was taught as a graduate student. Yet, they still teach public speaking very much as I taught it. Why?” (p. 116). The consequence of the remnants of the elocutionist pedagogy within modern public speaking courses is that, since speech is viewed as more science than art, there appears to be only one correct method of speechmaking. The standard bearer of the “correct” way to speak is the NCA, who produced documents used almost universally in the assessment of college- and university-level public speaking courses.

**Whiteness and Curriculum**

Public speaking curriculum, like all forms of institutionalized learning, is entrenched with the needs of the powerful. Sir Ken Robinson, one of the premiere experts in the history of education, noted that the public education system was originally constructed both to meet the needs of the Industrial Revolution and in its shape as an assembly line (Robinson & Aronica, 2016). Prior to industrialization, nearly the only people receiving education were White male elites. As such, Public Speaking curriculum was concerned with virtue. As the need for industrial workers increased and the middle class emerged, the goal shifted to useful speech as it would equip workers with the necessary communication skills. As McCann and colleagues (2020) noted, this advocacy of the usefulness of the discipline—“the oft repeated fact that ‘communication is the number one skill employers seek in employees!’”—is deeply intertwined with the discipline’s goal of promoting Whiteness (p. 246).

Ramasubramanian and Miles (2018) asked “under what conditions do commitments to diversity and multiculturalism unwittingly indicate complicity with more overt racism and ethnocentrism? Specifically, how does it indicate a form of colourblind racism?” (p. 428). Color-blind rhetoric is extremely efficient “at perpetuating the inequalities it claims not to notice, providing a discursive repertoire to decry the very mention of racial and ethnic membership as inherently racist; race-based initiatives can be opposed under the rubric of ‘equal opportunity for all’” (Rodriquez, 2006, p. 648). A professor exercising color-blind rhetoric may claim that they could not be racist since they have Black friends or reject claims that they are a member of the culture which disenfranchised Blacks because they, themselves, never owned slaves. A university administrator may oppose affirmative action on the grounds that it is racially discriminatory, going so far as to claim it violates Martin Luther King, Jr’s dream of judgment on the basis of character instead of skin color.

For Communication, Whiteness “is a structural problem (re)produced through the discipline’s received intellectual history, its concepts and epistemic assumptions, its canon, driving logics, and institutional frameworks” (Houdek, 2018, p. 294). Dutta (2020) argued that even the very nature of the discipline is inherently White. “The preoccupation of the discipline with the question of the communicative, then, is very much tied to the hegemonic interests of predominantly white academics, disciplinary associations, and organizations, defining the term ‘communicative’ within the parochial logics of whiteness” (p. 229).
Sounds About White: Critiquing the NCA Standards for Public Speaking Competency

Taken together, these authors demonstrate that the ways in which we think about, define, and teach what is good communication are structured by Whiteness. As past scholarship defines what is acceptable for future scholarship, Whiteness inevitably persists through the pages of our journals, our syllabi, and our gradebooks.

The controversy regarding the Distinguished Scholars, the highest award given by NCA, in 2019 is demonstrative of this issue. As a self-perpetuating board, the Scholars would select the new membership themselves. As power replicates itself, so did the older White men select other older White men to join them as Distinguished Scholars. When the NCA took over the selection process, Medhurst circulated a draft of an editorial for *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* that bemoaned the organization choosing diversity over merit, as if the two were somehow mutually exclusive.

In this vein, the reluctance of Medhurst and other Distinguished Scholars to see race as an analytic through which the closed structures of knowledge production have been used to dispossess, malign, and deny equal access to non-White, non-Western, and queer people while claiming to support diversity efforts show the continual significance of color. (Wanzer-Serrano et al., 2019, p. 504)

From the evergreen utilization of Plato and Aristotle to the veneration of White male “distinguished” scholars, the discipline remains inevitably intertwined with Whiteness.

**NCA Standards of “Correct” Speech**

The NCA is both the oldest and largest academic organization for the discipline of Communication. Founded over a century ago, it counts in its membership all major American universities that produce Communication research and the authors of the most widely used public speaking textbooks. As the primary organization for the discipline, it wields considerable sway as to how the public speaking course is taught. As such, a CDA analyzing the NCA’s standards for public speaking will reveal the most common trends in postsecondary public speaking pedagogy.

The NCA website has a page containing resources for assessment of the basic course, NCA’s term for public speaking. The site explained that assessment “is a practice in which all programs should engage” which “provides evidence that is useful when advocating for the resources that are needed to sustain a high-quality course” (National Communication Association, 2017). To guide members on how to properly assess student speech, two primary documents are listed. The first is “Speaking and Listening Competencies for College Students” (SLC) (Morreale et al., 1998). While it was first published almost 2 decades ago, it is still presently listed as a resource for current use in assessment. The second document, “The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form and Manual” (CSS) (Morreale et al., 2007), published 9 years after the first, is the most recent addition. A full analysis of the collective 75 pages of each assessment document, many of which involve topics with a tertiary relation to speaking like research skills, are beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, I focus on several particular policies relevant to the manner in which students are required to speak in order to meet NCA’s standards.

The preface to the section of SLC labeled “Speaking Competencies” reads “In order to be a COMPETENT SPEAKER, a person must be able to compose a message and provide ideas and information suitable to the topic, purpose, and audience” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 7, emphasis original). Suitability and the companion term appropriateness were exceedingly common within both the SLC and CSS. Variations of
these terms appear collectively 39 times in SLC and 82 times in CSS. While, as I will discuss later, CSS has rather vague standards for appropriateness and suitability, SLC makes them significantly more explicit. While SLC includes the line that students “Select words that avoid sexism, racism, and other forms of prejudice” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 7), its own standards, under critical analysis, seem to violate this rule. For instance, under the section entitled “Articulate Clearly,” students are required to “Demonstrate knowledge of the sounds of the American English language” and “Use the sounds of the American English language” (Morreale et al., 1998, pp. 8–9). In the next section, entitled “Employ Language Appropriate To The Designated Audience,” students are cautioned that “slang, idiomatic language, and regionalisms may facilitate understanding when communicating with others who share meanings for those terms, but can hinder understanding in those situations where meanings are not shared” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9). Instead, students are demanded to “Use standard pronunciation” and “Use standard grammar” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9).

The text of CSS seems far more concerned, on its face, with avoiding bias than SLC. The term bias, in connection with the manner in which CSS avoids it, is mentioned 15 times. The authors of CSS promote it as being “developed with great concern for its psychometric reliability and validity and for biases of any kind and is determined to be a reliable, valid, and useful instrument with which to judge speeches” (Morreale et al., 2007, p. 8). Under the section describing the significant characteristics of CSS, the last characteristic, “Is free of cultural bias,” states:

> Each competency is assessed with respect to the target audience and occasion. In other words, judgments are based upon the degree to which the behavior is appropriate to the “audience and occasion.” As long as the evaluator/assessor bases judgments on these criteria, cultural bias should not become a factor. (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9)

The seventh competency listed within CSS, however, seems to fall short of this proclamation. Competency Seven, labeled “Uses pronunciation, grammar, and articulation appropriate to the audience and occasion,” like the other competencies, gives standards and examples for Excellent, Satisfactory, and Unsatisfactory ratings. In order to earn an Excellent rating, “the speaker exhibits exceptional fluency, properly formed sounds which enhance the message, and no pronunciation or grammatical errors” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 15). Conversely, a student earning an Unsatisfactory rating has “frequent errors in pronunciation and grammar make it difficult for the audience to understand the message” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 15).

As an offer of proof of its lack of cultural bias, CSS mentions the results of two uncited studies. In the first, a group of 12 presumably White instructors and 28 “minority students” were found to have similar ratings of 12 student speeches. In the second, a statistical analysis of the evaluation of classroom speeches found no significant racial difference in grading. Neither of these results, however, effectively establishes a lack of cultural or racial bias in the implementation of the instrument. Much like Token Black from this essay’s opening example, it is just as likely that students scored similarly because they similarly adopted the standards for speaking competency in both grading and performing speeches, not because the standards are open to their cultural forms of speech.

**Critical Discourse Analysis**

CDA, according to van Dijk (2003), “is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p. 352). It is not a method, per se, but a methodological
approach concerned with understanding how certain discourses circulate to (re)produce hierarchies of power within a given society. In the case of SLC and CSS, they mutually endeavor to discursively produce “The Competent Speaker” (Morreale et al., 2007, p. 27). The critical question, then, is what “The Competent Speaker” produced by this discourse looks and sounds like. In the current analysis, two primary discourses emerged: the emphasis on Standard American English and the demand for appropriate and suitable forms of communication.

“Standard” American English

Though neither SLC nor CCS use the specific term, “Standard American English,” the context of various rules, especially within SLC, indicates that it is what the authors were referring to. For instance, when students are told to “Use the sounds of the American English language” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 8) and use “standard pronunciation” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9), the similarity of the two rules infers a reference to Standard American English. While some might fallaciously argue that these statements cannot be combined, the entire purpose of any critical analysis is to expose hidden structures. In the same logic that we do not require a speaker to state “I am a racist” to properly label their words as racist speech, neither do SLC and CSS have to use the phrase “Standard American English” to demand and enforce its standards. The problem with these standards, however, is that there is nothing standard about how Americans use English.

The concept traces its roots to Mencken’s (1921) The American Language, the first text to explicitly attempt to identify and dictate the standards of American language. According to Kramer (2014), Mencken’s goal was to develop “a vocabulary drawn from American experience, a standard pronunciation that reflected American speech, a grammar grounded in common American usage” (p. 19). This development occurred in response to the political tensions of World War I, where leaders tried to invoke national unity by standardizing language use within the United States (Wiley & Lukes, 1996). The existence of Standard American English as both a fictitious language and as allegedly superior to all other variations is an effect of standard language ideology. Milroy (2000) explained that such ideologies are “supportive of a form of a language ‘imagined’ as ‘standard,’ and adversely critical of the speech of disfavored social groups” (p. 63).

Schooling at the K–12 and postsecondary levels are the primary societal mechanism for enforcing standard language ideology. Wortham (2008) argued that “educational institutions play central roles in authorizing and circulating ideologies of language through which ‘educated’ and ‘uneducated’ language use are associated with differentially valued types of people” (p. 39). This differentiation of value based on language, which Lippi-Green (2012) described as language subordination, is particularly harmful to students of color.

Language is deeply tied to one’s culture. For instance, African American Vernacular English (AAVE) “is a strong marker of racial identity and social experience for many African Americans” (Godley & Loretto, 2013, p. 317). Subordinating the language of individuals who use AAVE or other dialects, then, becomes a proxy for racism. Salazar (2013) explained the functioning of this racist system where:

students of color have been compelled for generations to divest themselves of their linguistic, cultural, and familial resources to succeed in U.S. public schools . . . When students of color experience academic difficulties, their struggles are often attributed to their culture, language, and home environment. (pp. 121–122)
Black students are aware of the White view that their language is deficient. Godley and Escher (2012) found that Black students in American schools tended to avoid use of AAVE because they feared being labeled ignorant or that their White peers and faculty would not understand them.

This subordination is, of course, not limited to schools. Senator Harry Reid, for instance, famously claimed that the key to President Obama’s success was due to Obama having “no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one” (Zeleny, 2010). This racist statement is reflective of America’s historical treatment of Black men and women and their language. Nott and Gliddon (1854) claimed that “unlike the ‘complex languages’ spoken by Caucasians, [Black people] spoke primitive languages reflecting simplistic mentality” (p. 27). This sentiment is similar to the statement Hegel made about Africa lacking a history (Kuykendall, 1993). The NCA’s demand for Standard American English, then, is likewise an extension of this same dangerous ideology.

“Suitable” and “Appropriate”

The argument might be made that the NCA is no longer enforcing standard language ideology since it updated the standards of SLC to the standards of CCS. This might carry weight if the NCA were not still displaying SLC on its website. Even if it was not, however, the continued rhetoric of suitable—“compose a message and provide ideas and information suitable to the topic, purpose, and audience” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 7)—and appropriate—“Employ Language Appropriate To The Designated Audience” (Morreale et al., 1998, p. 9)—speech is equally problematic. My analysis of CCS reveals that, paired with the statements about the lack of cultural bias, it exists as an example of color-blind racist rhetoric.

In academic spaces, what is appropriate is dictated by the same norms that govern Standard American English. We speak what Martinez (2013) calls academese. Martinez (2013) wrote about time spent as a student confronting the oppressive nature of our academic tongue, writing:

“They came back to me as quickly as I tried to forget them. The memories. The memories of pain and silence. The memories of feeling displaced and homeless. The memories of sitting in a classroom discussing critical theories about racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, gentrification, and so forth, plaguing social justice and equality—and not saying anything. The memories of feeling outside looking in: sitting in a classroom and observing people talking about you—your people—and not saying anything. Not because you have nothing to say, but rather because you don’t speak the language. The language of the ivory tower that somehow speaks like it understands “your problem” and yet has never truly lived in your place. Language evoked by peers who “know” what they are talking about. Bullshit. (p. 379)”

Dictating that certain speech is inappropriate for a classroom setting, but other speech is appropriate, is not necessarily a problem. When the standards for appropriateness fall along racial lines, then appropriateness and suitability become code for color-blind racist policies. The effect of such policies is telling Black students that their home cultures are inappropriate within a professional setting like a classroom, that they must be more like their White colleagues to succeed. Defenders of these policies, like Kutz (1998), argued “What we are really asking students to do as they enter the university is not to replace one way of speaking or writing with another, but to add yet another style to their existing repertoire” (p. 85). White students, however, are never asked to add AAVE to their “existing repertoire,” thereby cementing the hierarchy that White language is superior to Black language.
As Nance (1989) noted, these hegemonic practices of conformity tend to punish minoritized students the most. Rather than a degree being evidence of “their intelligence, desire to learn or will to succeed,” it instead is a marker of “their ability to successfully master the college/university ‘way’ of being” (Nance, 1989, p. 14). Bartholomae (1985) explained that in order to be academically successful, “students must learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (p. 134). Rhetorically, this punishes a student for his or her cultural diversity, while insisting the hegemonic standard is normal or professional (Rodriguez & Chawla, 2010). “When teachers condescendingly explain to students that a particular ethnic style of communication is inherently ok but can only be used outside of the classroom, then the real lesson for the day is intolerance” (Nance, 1989, p. 23). As students from minoritized backgrounds often have patterns of speech and thought that diverge from the academic hegemony, they simultaneously have their own culture devalued and struggle more to complete their courses.

Reimagining the “Competent” Speaker

Both texts produced by the NCA as guidance for public speaking, when viewed through the lens of CDA, are problematic. Though both the SLC and CSS promote, on their face, a nondiscriminatory and unbiased stance, the inevitable “Competent Speaker” produced by their discourses is the White speaker. The seemingly neutral stance taken by the NCA standards for competency reifies Whiteness as normal, acceptable, and achievable.

Minoritized students, then, are at a distinct disadvantage in public speaking classes in comparison to their White colleagues. This is particularly true for Black students. Despite the progress American society has made and NCAs overall stance against discrimination, organizations and teachers can unknowingly further racist practices. Undoing these structures and providing for a more inclusive pedagogy, then, requires a reimagining of the public speaking course entirely.

Proponents of the type of pedagogy demanded by SLC and CCS promote this practice by purporting to provide a degree of objectivity when assessing student work. However, as Shor and Freire (1987) noted, it is fundamentally impossible for an educator to be truly neutral. Expressing neutrality or objectivity, then, is itself a political statement. It is true, however, that most public speaking instructors do not meaningfully intend to oppress their students. Freire (1970) observed “innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize” (p. 48). Upon the knowledge that education is political and that current practices dehumanize students, Shor and Freire (1987) explained that an educator must then ask himself or herself a series of inquiries including “in favor of whom am I being a teacher? By asking in favor of whom am I educating, the teacher must also ask against whom am I educating” (p. 46).

In considering these questions, we can find inspiration by reconceptualizing public speaking pedagogy away from the White European lens to a different continent entirely. Tillotson and McDougal (2013) are the first authors to articulate the field of Applied Africana Studies. Tillotson and McDougal provided general principles for their method rather than explicit prescriptions on how to carry it out. The fundamental assumption of Applied Africana Studies that the “needs and interests of people of African descent cannot be understood or appropriately addressed without a clear assessment of the forces of domination, oppression, or prevention that operate against the interests of people of African descent” (Tillotson & McDougal, 2013, p. 106). Further, work “should be geared toward solving problems or meeting challenges that are relevant to people of African descent” (Tillotson & McDougal, 2013, p. 105).
In terms of method, Tillotson and McDougal (2013) stated that “[p]urely speculative scholarship alone cannot fulfill the mission of Applied Africana Studies” and that “Applied Africana Studies transcends the Western traditional dichotomy that exists between basic and applied research” (p. 106). Finally, Tillotson and McDougal (2013) argued that “Applied Africana Studies is focused on producing real-world, race-specific research solutions that can be translated to African people in a digestible form” (p. 106). Supporting this, they wrote that “research must be translatable to the everyday lives of African people while simultaneously removing the mystery and mistrust that has historically alienated African Americans from the research process” (p. 109).

The question then becomes what a liberated classroom might look like under the Applied African Studies paradigm. Nance (1989), in an essay examining the incorporation of ethnic minority students into public speaking courses, provided an example of such a classroom. While Nance's model is certainly liberated, it is important to note that it is only one such shape a liberated classroom could take. Applying Nance's writing as a prescriptive model engages in the same problems present within the current NCA model.

Nance (1989) described a classroom that “begins with statements of expectations by each student and the teacher” (p. 8). After these initial statements, all parties involved engage in a productive dialogue as to how the course can be adapted to adhere to a unified set of expectations within the confines of university policies. During the skills portion of the course, the instructor presents not only the theoretical basis for said skills, but “will acknowledge the cultural origins of the communication theories, place them into a social and political context and suggest that other understandings of communication exist that are also legitimate” (Nance, 1989, p. 11). Following the skills portion of the class, students will individually and collaboratively choose issues salient to themselves on which to base their speeches.

In terms of assessment, instructors will abdicate the philosophy that “[g]ood speeches are those that follow the rules as we taught them” (Nance, 1989, p. 5). Instead, the primary evaluation standard, as with art, “is that the speech worked . . . that it accomplished its goal” (Nance, 1989, p. 5). The solution is not Fanon’s (1967) notion of replacing colonial languages with native tongues. Replacing one standard language ideology is like a slave being sold from an oppressive master to a more benevolent one. Instead, liberation within the language used in the classroom requires no masters, but a respect for the autonomy and tongue of each individual. In taking each of these steps in like with Applied Africana Studies, the public speaking classroom can become a place of liberation, rather than oppression.

**Conclusion**

In summary, a critical discourse analysis of the NCA standards for public speaking competency revealed some rather disturbing hidden trends. Through a dual emphasis on Standard American English and appropriateness, the competent NCA speaker is one that sounds, if not looks, like the White ideal. Much like Token Black, minority students are forced to either adopt a White voice or risk a poor grade in the class.

I write this essay not to condemn the NCA, nor any public speaking instructor. Instead, I hope this analysis will cause an impetus for the reconsideration of the effects of our public speaking pedagogy. As referenced previously, public speaking has a long history, but is long overdue for revision. In particular, it is long past time for my colleagues and I to stop enforcing White hegemonic standards in how we demand our students speak.
The liberated public speaking classroom is an improbable, yet still possible, outcome. Future research might consider or even test new models for their effectiveness in increasing inclusion and alleviating the demand of White speech. It will be a long and arduous process, but it is certainly a journey worth taking. If successful, it is my hope that one day students will look back at our current classes as misguided past, rather than an oppressive present.

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The Communication Discipline and Peace Education: A Valuable Intersection for Disrupting Violence in Communication Centers

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**Keywords:** interdisciplinary; peace education; communication pedagogy; educational violence; resource centers

**Abstract:** Violence is a significant issue impacting the physical, mental, social, and economic health of our learning communities. For decades the discipline of peace education has explored the effects of nonphysical violence on students and educators, as well as ways to create more peaceful, less violent, and equitable educational practices. While communication frameworks have been used in peace education research, no research found has theorized the potential value of peace education for the communication discipline. Using the contextual background of communication centers, this piece seeks to disrupt steadfast norms and practices within communication centers from the perspective of peace education. We provide an overview of the field of peace education and explicate opportunities within the communication discipline to use peace education frameworks, theory, and practice to develop pedagogies of renewal and close with practical recommendations for communication centers going forward.

*A violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the mind and the spirit.*

(Galtung, 1990, p. 294)

Violence is “a significant public health problem,” impacting the physical, mental, social, and economic health of our communities (Rutherford et al., 2007, p. 676). While often framed within the context of the intentional use of force or power against an individual or group, violence does not have to be a physical
act to affect an individual or group negatively. Marginalized and disenfranchised populations endure the ancestral trauma of collective violence, “the instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group . . . against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives” (Zwi et al., 2002, p. 215). Slavery, the massacre of Native and Indigenous peoples, and the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII are examples of collective violence that still plague our society and limit equal access and opportunity for entire cultural groups, including access to higher education and the ability to achieve educational goals within a structurally oppressive system designed to exclude them.

For decades peace education has explored the effects of nonphysical violence, including the legacy of collective violence and the resulting cultural trauma, on students and educators in the classroom. Recent scholarship (Ladva, 2020; May & McDermott, 2021), popular press (Barber et al., 2020; Ezarik, 2021; Sangaramoorthy & Richardson, 2020), and activism (Academics for Black Survival, n.d.; GLSEN, n.d.) underscore the pervasive nature of violence in our educational systems and the need for inclusive strategies. For the communication discipline specifically, communication centers offer a starting point for challenging long-standing oppressive pedagogical practices that impact the entire campus community (Fotsch, 2008). Within the field of peace education, Ladson-Billings (1995) argues for full programmatic reform, a disruption to the system. This is the perspective in which this piece is positioned: disruption. Building upon recent scholarship that has ignited the conversation regarding the absence of Black Language in the communication center (Ladva, 2020) and questioned the invisibility of Indigenous learners through Western public speaking practices (May & McDermott, 2021), this piece continues the conversation to disrupt steadfast White Mainstream English (WME) values promoted within communication centers and the institutions in which they are situated. Moreover, since little scholarship has explored the intersection of the communication discipline and the field of peace education, this piece highlights future directions for enhancing educational practices and scholarship through the intersection of communication and peace education.

Starting with an overview of the field of peace education, this article argues the value of intersecting the communication and peace education disciplines. We then explore the ways in which communication centers may perpetuate structural and cultural violence within their policies and practices. The piece closes with recommendations for communication centers to begin disrupting and dismantling violence and racism through pedagogy practice and training.

Situating the Authors

Disruption challenges educators to confront a version of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) steeped in colonialism and dominated by White mainstream norms and values. Across the United States (U.S.), university faculty and administrators remain predominantly White (roughly 75%) (Davis & Fry, 2019) as student populations continue to grow in all aspects of diversity. Within the communication discipline specifically, White masculinity remains at the center of research, practice, and pedagogy (Chakravartty et al., 2018), and underrepresented faculty are often tasked with doing the “work” associated with diversity and belonging, creating additional burden and trauma (Flaherty, 2019a). As White, cis-gender, heteronormative scholars committed to disruption, the authors recognize their privilege and power while inviting their peers to critically reflect on their scholarship to create space for different ways of knowing. As educators and practitioners, we seek to disrupt our practice through continuing education, research, and National Communication Association (NCA) membership in caucuses and divisions that help us
further understand the experiences of students and peers working in predominantly White spaces. Perhaps most importantly, we embrace failure and recognize our students as partners in disruption.

**Literature Review**

**What Is Peace Education?**

Communication scholars have a rich history of integrating communication pedagogy with complementary disciplines to develop scholarship and practice. Goodboy (2018) highlighted the value of using instructional communication scholarship and communication pedagogy in tandem with diverse disciplines for providing educators with micro (i.e., communication pedagogy) and macro (i.e., instructional communication) perspectives for understanding the communication courses they teach. Danielson (2018) explores the potential value of engaging in the principles of good Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) practice to elucidate communication pedagogy expansions and practical applications at the (inter)national level. As we continue to find value in the intersection of disciplines, one field with immeasurable potential for disrupting oppressive communication pedagogy is peace education.

Peace education scholarship considers “content, processes, and educational structures that seek to dismantle various forms of violence, as well as move toward broader cultures of peace, justice, and human rights” (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021, p. 1). Peace education has grown in the last several decades from the margins of educational policy into mainstream educational practices and scholarship (for a full review of peace education history see Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021; Lum, 2021). Scholars have characterized the field as wide-ranging, viewing it as a “vehicle both to undo violence in its various forms (e.g., direct, cultural, and structural) and to build conditions for sustainable peace” (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021, p. 16). As defined by Hantzopoulos & Bajaj (2021), peace education “considers how practice, theory, and pedagogy combine to develop the necessary skills and ideologies to envision and move toward a more equitable, just, and nonviolent future” (p. 16). Thus, peace education can be used to disrupt structural violence that oppresses individuals, and instructors and scholars within the field seek to disrupt systematic, systemic, and direct violence through various forms of peace education practices (e.g., human rights education, anti-racist education, social justice education, conflict resolution, etc.) (Galtung, 1990; Lum, 2021).

In addition to centering peace, justice, and human rights, the field of peace education provides a new lens with which to define and identify violence. Perhaps traditionally thought as extreme force that can cause physical harm, Galtung (1990), argues that violence takes three main forms: “Direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups and downs; cultural violence is an invariant, a ‘permanence’” (Galtung, 1990, p. 294). Although direct violence may occur within the context of a specific event(s), such as corporal punishment or sexual assault, structural and cultural violence are more indirect, albeit hidden, forms of collective violence (Zwi et al., 2002) that plague educational systems. Structural violence considers how social and economic systems reproduce inequity as one group exerts power and control over another. Structural violence may take the form of poverty, hunger, or even exclusion for not conforming to normative standards (Cremin & Guilherme, 2016; Harris, 2007). This violence encompasses anything that hinders a student from developing their capabilities or opportunities (McConnell et al., 2021; Winter, 2012). Cultural violence is “any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimize violence in its direct or structural form” (Galtung, 1990, p. 291) and often refers to how people are “denied dignity, rights, and opportunities based on their ascribed identities to bolster racism,
patriarchy, militarism, classism, and other forms of systemic oppression” (Hantzopoulos & Williams, 2017, p. 3). Ultimately, cultural violence is comprised of norms and behaviors that support or allow for direct and structural violence to be perpetuated.

For decades within the educational system, questions and concerns regarding structural, cultural, and direct violence have been raised as historically marginalized students are required to conform to Western values and standards. Concerns regarding school administration policies, pedagogical methods, educational labeling, classroom interaction, childhood games, and teacher reactions, as well as child abuse, have been raised for sustaining violent systems in schools (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Epp & Watkinson, 1997; Harris, 2008; Martin et al., 2019). From the Indigenous boarding schools where students were not even allowed to speak their own language (Miller, 2008; Pihama & Lee-Morgan, 2019) to “Whitewashing” Black Language (Ladva, 2020), violence in schools may be perpetuated by thoughts, words, and deeds, under the guise of assimilation and accommodation (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2011). Within the context of the modern classroom, specifically, cultural violence may be curricular, such as limiting discussions of other faiths, cultures, and/or failing to consider the achievements of women and historically underrepresented people (see Cremin & Guilherme, 2016, for more information). Cultural violence can also be unintentionally inflicted through assessment practices that fail to recognize different ways of knowing outside of WME. No matter the type, however, violence in all its forms (direct, structural, and cultural) limits human flourishing (Galtung, 1969) and perpetuates ancestral trauma for students of historically marginalized backgrounds.

Although scholars have argued that education, in general, can help disrupt all forms of violence, researchers and practitioners have identified and examined systemic violence in schools, underscoring the need for reform and further disruption. As argued by Ladson-Billings (1995), “the goal of education becomes how to ‘fit’ students constructed as ‘other’ by virtue of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class into a hierarchical structure that is defined as meritocracy” (p. 467). As a result, historically marginalized student learning is often framed from a deficit perspective, and educators may require students to assimilate/accommodate/reject their culture to understand and succeed within a White, Western, neoliberal system. These practices not only silence historically marginalized voices but may serve to further traumatize these learners by requiring them to adapt/adopt Western norms and practices or risk failure (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021; Harris, 2008)—an approach used by colonizers to diminish and destroy traditional ways of knowing (Pihama & Lee-Morgan, 2019). As educators strive to be more responsive to the “demands placed on communicators by the social and political conditions of our time” (Fry, 1986, p. 76), peace education becomes a tool for dismantling violent (direct and indirect) structures in the educational system. We argue that peace education provides a valuable starting point for analyzing potentially violent structural and cultural policies and practices within communication research, education, and pedagogy.

**Communication and Peace Education**

Communication is often cited as a vital tool for engaging in peace education practices (Baesler & Lauricella, 2012; Duckworth, 2011; Harris, 2008). As argued by Ellis and Warshel (2011) communication and media studies are central to peace education as communication channels such as radio, TV, film, the internet, music, and more can be used to facilitate peace education outside of the classroom. Further, communication frameworks, such as conflict management, interpersonal communication theories, and audience analysis, can enhance the overall communication of peace education practices (Ellis & Warshel,
However, no research has argued or showcased the reciprocal value of peace education theories and practices within the communication discipline, classrooms, and support centers to dismantle violence and create sustainable peace in higher education and society at large. Through the specific example of the communication center, we argue that communication and peace education in conjunction can be used to lessen the inequities of Western public speaking practices and work toward disrupting racism.

Opportunities Within the Communication Discipline

Recently, in the communication discipline, scholars have called attention to the lack of diversity within the discipline (Calvente et al., 2020), in regard to scholarship (Simmons & Wahl, 2016; Trepte & Loths, 2020), and within some prestigious award nomination practices (i.e., #CommsoWhite; Flaherty, 2019b; Murthy, 2020). As written by Simmons and Wahl (2016), “we are overdue in productively addressing issues of ‘diversity—or the lack thereof—in mainstream communication education research” (abstract). Unfortunately, this lack of diversity is not sequestered to just research practices and award nominations as scholars have argued that hegemonic Whiteness extends into discipline-specific textbooks (Manning, 2020). Since research often informs teaching materials and best pedagogical practices, the research conducted and published within the discipline may affect how communication is taught, framed, and tutored. Manning (2020) found in “most (interpersonal communication) texts it appears authors sought to diversify contents by using non-white representations as an add-on rather than as a central part of the text” (p. 235). These examples reflect the absence of diversity in our discipline and how issues of race are often considered an afterthought in our study and pedagogical practices. Viewing diversity as an “add-on” and emphasizing the concept of “inclusion” over disruption, the communication discipline “maintains a (white, male, straight, able-bodied) identity with power over the bodies it ostensibly includes” (Simmons & Wahl, 2016, p. 234).

Furthermore, the lack of diversity within the discipline itself creates an environment that privileges certain norms of language and thought. As scholars like Ladva (2020) have sought to uplift the voices and perspectives of students, educators, and scholars from the Black community, similar calls are being made regarding Native and Indigenous communities. May & McDermott (2021) highlight that invisibility is the “modern form of racism used against Native Americans” (see the American Indian College Fund, 2019, p. 5 as cited by May & McDermott, 2021), calling for culturally responsive education in public speaking classrooms. May and McDermott argue that individual educators can change public speaking practices (i.e., nonverbal standards) and policies (i.e., what is a “credible” source, acceptable speech topics) to create more inclusive classrooms for Indigenous learners.

Building on these previous works, however, we seek to push the conversation further, calling for communication centers to implement peace education theories and practices to further disrupt violence within the communication discipline. We continue to silence historically marginalized communities and voices by gatekeeping what counts as knowledge and language in our classrooms, in our campus resource centers, and in our campus communities. As communication scholars, however, we have tools to begin disrupting and dismantling this structural and cultural violence within our centers and our discipline if used in conjunction with peace education scholarship.
Communication Centers

Communication centers, while they may range in size and services available, generally provide oral communication tutoring to undergraduate students within the communication basic course (Yook & Atkins-Sayre, 2012). While no two centers are alike, due to their function within the campus community to support the oral and/or written communication skills of students, these centers may inadvertently work to silence non-Western communication norms despite their historical charge to promote student success. Resource Centers, or Learning Assistance Centers, started appearing on college campuses in the 1970s as a “natural response to growing needs by an increasingly diverse heterogeneous college student body” (Arendale, 2004, p. 4) (i.e., a diverse population that did not represent one singular experience with one dominant discourse, but instead reflected a diversity of cultures, identities, experiences, and languages). Oftentimes, students who are perceived to be “at-risk” of dropping out due to personal or academic struggles are often referred to tutoring and counseling resources to promote retention and improve academic performance (Barefoot, 2004; Henchy, 2013). Previous research has shown that students most likely to use campus resources are historically marginalized and first-generation college students (Brock, 2010; Strada-Gallup, 2017) who may speak WME as a second language. For communication centers, this mentality shapes the cultural assumptions that students of color need help in order to level the playing field (Grimm, 2011). With such assumptions in place, students of color are expected to learn the conventions of WME and, in the process, “rid themselves of all linguistic features that may identify them with communities of color” (Greenfield, 2011, p. 46). Not only does this negate their cultural identity, but it also creates a cycle of repression and violence as they try to conform to standards in the classroom that are only reinforced by resource centers designed to support them.

While scholarly research on communication centers is limited in scope, writing center research speaks to the value and importance of language diversity in pedagogical approaches in pursuit of racial justice and equity. In 1974, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) at their Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) adopted the Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL) resolutions. This resolution, in part, states:

> We affirm the students’ rights to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. . . . We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 6)

Even with the SRTOL passage and its recognition and affirmation of language diversity, writing studies scholars continue to address inequities in the writing center and writing pedagogy. Writing centers, “like their institutions in which they are situated, are not racially neutral sites of discourse and practice” (Greenfield & Rowan, 2011, p. 1). This includes contemporary scholarship which challenges the pedagogical approach of code-switching—“[teaching] students to translate codes of their Englishes into the codes of standard academic prose” (Hardee, n.d., para. 4). Critics of code-switching believe it to maintain the superiority of one English and inherently dismisses others. In “An Updated SRTOL?” (2011) Canagarajah acknowledges the limits of SRTOL and the need to embrace “a critical, reflective use of hybrid linguistic resources” (Diab et al., 2012, p. 3). Vershawn Ashanti Young (2014) characterizes this hybridity of language as code-meshing, or the welcoming of all linguistic resources, including those considered “nonstandard,” into academic prose.
Perpetuating Violence and Racism: A Reinforced Cycle

As scholars and practitioners, we are challenged to consider how violence is enacted in our communication centers. For example, a critical review of rubrics used to evaluate competency demonstrates possible adherence to WME expectations. Some educators in the classroom and coaching staff in the communication center still assess a student’s pronunciation or use of appropriate (re: WME) vocabulary as part of determining competency and level of preparedness. When we use WME as the standard to which everyone is measured, we invalidate other ways of knowing and communicating and continue to oppress. As Greenfield (2011) expresses, racism is uniquely tied to the denial of language diversity:

the language varieties deemed inferior in the United States (so much so that they are often dismissed not simply as inferior varieties but not as varieties at all—just as conglomerations of slang, street talk, or poor English) tend to be the languages whose origins can be traced to periods in American history when communities of racially oppressed people used these languages to enact agency. (p. 36)

As argued by Freire (1970), hooks (1994, 2003), and McLaren (2002, 2005), teaching is inherently political. When we are in the classroom, we are taking a stance, even in courses which may seem apolitical (i.e., public speaking). We argue this extends to those who direct and staff campus resource centers as well. Currently, communication center practices may silence the communication norms of non-Western students by valuing WME above all else. Thus, communication centers are urged to reflect on and change the knowledge and language that is valued within their spaces.

Communication Center Recommendations

Through the synthesis of peace education scholarship and current communication center practices, recommendations are proposed for moving centers toward more peaceful education pedagogies and practices. These recommendations challenge communication centers to evaluate their current practices for hidden perpetuations of violence (direct and indirect) to better support historically marginalized students, dismantle violence, and promote the communication competence of the communities we serve.

Critically consider and evaluate language and public speaking framing to explore how the communication discipline can play a role in interrupting the reproduction of violence.

Overall, scholars within the communication discipline need to be aware of the damage exclusionary language can have on students’ cultural and personal identities. As argued by Davies (2010), “rebuilding culture can be an important part of restoring identity post-conflict” (p. 492). However, many Indigenous and other historically minoritized individuals have not been given the space to restore their identity and culture. Although slavery and Indigenous boarding schools may be in the “past,” once out of these direct violence experiences, oppressive systems do not give traditionally marginalized communities the space to reclaim their identity. For example, as we still require those from non-Western cultural identities and languages to code-switch, elders are not considered “credible” academic sources, and slang words in speeches result in point deductions.

As such, the first step in dismantling the reproduction of harmful ideology and practices is through breaking the cycle of education’s reproduction of conflict (Davies, 2010). In terms of communication centers, this can be done via the reframing of Westernized public speaking norms. We may need to teach our students WME and Western public speaking norms due to accreditation standards; however, as
educators, we do not have to frame these standards of public speaking as the only ideal. We can allow our students to explore storytelling as a form of public speaking (May & McDermott, 2021), not just as a type of attention-getter or concluding remark. In addition, we can acknowledge the differences in nonverbals across different cultures. Taking the time to overview different nonverbal norms and acknowledge the role of nonverbals in a community's culture can help to empower a diversity of nonverbal practices. A more radical approach is to allow students to present in their native language. One of the authors, who also serves as a Center Director, recently taught a communication-based intensive to Yup’ik Indigenous learners in rural Alaska. When students were given the space to present in their native language (Yugtun), the entire dynamic of the learning community shifted. From the level of comfort communicated in their posture and gestures to the active participation from the peers, it was humbling and inspiring to watch. Additionally, the students provided main points in English to satisfy the grading process; however, a word-for-word translation was not needed as the presentation transcended language.

Collectively, if we are to engage in dismantling violence at the individual level, it must also be done within the upper levels of our discipline in order to enact actual change. We need to frame Western public speaking norms as a form, not the standard of public speaking. By doing such, we are engaging our students in the possibilities of rhetorical flexibility. Rhetorical flexibility means knowing different communicative tools and strategies, and “being able to choose the best tools and strategies to create and communicate your meaning for any given context” (Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, n.d., para. 2). As many educators know, we have colleagues who still believe in and want to maintain the norms of WME. Students must take courses from these colleagues. However, by empowering students with the knowledge that Western public speaking norms is one form, not the only form, they can choose whether or not to adhere or to challenge and use rhetorical flexibility (recognizing their audience) when making that decision. Furthermore, they may take this knowledge into the workplace to continue to shift business communication norms. For communication centers, this means grounding rhetorical flexibility in tutor/coach training. Tutors trained in rhetorical flexibility would then be able to address rhetorical flexibility with students in the center by discussing assignment requirements, audience expectations, and reflect upon how this may (or may not) be grounded in a certain idea of knowledge sharing and assessment (re: Western norms/standards). And consider the possibilities and limitations of resisting or challenging these set standards.

Evaluate current versus ideal communication center practices and role in the campus community.

Second, communication centers are challenged to question the current and ideal role of the center within their campus communities. Referencing writing centers, Inoue (2016) argues such spaces can “facilitate structural changes in society, disciplines, and the institution itself,” and can serve as “centers for revolutions, for social justice work.” This also applies to communication centers and their ability to challenge the status quo by supporting student advocacy in the ways of knowing and expression. As Ladva (2020) stated, “The core of communication center work is to support students (and others who use our centers) to speak their truth in college and beyond” (p. 4), yet when we teach only Western cultural communication practices, we deny those who communicate outside of Western cultural norms “their truth.”

Likewise, Native and Indigenous traditional knowledge systems are also missing from these norms. By encouraging Indigenous ways of knowing into the classroom, there is a recognition of its value and how this knowledge contributes to non-Indigenous understanding of the world (Battiste, 2002). Questioning
the current role and function of communication center practices may provide a starting point for evaluating the gap between the current resources provided and students’ needs during and after their degree. Bajaj (2015) argued, “attention must be paid to the format, structure, and methods of the peace education process in order to prevent good intentions from causing harm or adverse consequences” (p. 2).

Therefore, the second step in implementing peace education practices and dismantling violent systems is through the evaluation of current practices. Questions to evaluate current practices for communication centers might include evaluating barriers to access (i.e., work/life of student population vs. the time the center is open, cancellation policies), recruiting, retaining, and training practices for coaches (i.e., who is represented on the staff, how are staff expected to structure a coaching session), what is the ideal role of the center in the campus community (i.e., does it just serve 100-level public speaking students, is the center a touchstone for students struggling throughout their college career), and what trainings could be beneficial for the campus community (i.e., providing training for fellow faculty to critically reflect on expected speaking standards in their classrooms).

Center directors are also encouraged to partner with other organizations on campus committed to diversity, inclusion, and belonging to further disrupt White, mainstream practices which may be invisible to the dominant majority. As a tangible example, one of the authors invited the Director of Multicultural Student Affairs to evaluate not only their practices but their physical environment to identify strengths and opportunities for further disruption. The Director and her “board of student diversity ambassadors” challenged the center to develop a mission statement that decenters Whiteness, increase recruitment efforts to promote representation, de-emphasize WME, and physically leave the confines of the four walls that “limit” our center and engage with students where they feel the most comfortable and empowered.

**Peace education is co-creational, dynamic, and continuous; so should be our constant reflection and evaluation of the role and success of the communication center.**

Finally, as with any long-term cultural and structural change, we need to constantly reflect on and evaluate the role and success of the communication center. Within peace education, scholars have argued, “teachers must engage in critical self-reflection about their positionality and role in the educational process” (Bajaj, 2015, p. 2). Similarly, the communication center must engage in continuous reflection and evaluation of their positionality and role in campus communities. Therefore, we need to solicit feedback, quantitative and qualitative, from the students we serve in the classroom and at our communication center. During an intensive course with Indigenous learners, for example, one of the authors created an assignment where learners were invited to share their feedback on this research paper and the tenets of peace education. Through reflective prompts, students were given space to not only connect with their experiences as emerging communication scholars, they were also invited to share their feedback on peace education, a pedagogical practice designed to disrupt higher education and better support their needs as learners. In addition to collecting data that allows for strategic curricular revisions, the students shared their stories of trauma and resilience as they continue to work toward degree completion.

Furthermore, we are invited to consider critical analysis of how changes to policies and practices may need to adjust to reflect changing social landscapes. However, Galtung (1990) cautions that,
A major task of peace research, and the peace movement in general, is that never-ending search for a peace culture—problematic, because of the temptation to institutionalize that culture, making it obligatory with the hope of internalizing it everywhere. And that would already be direct violence, imposing a culture. (p. 291)

Changes made for one semester or one tutor session may not promote social justice, equity, and peace in the following semester or session. Thus, constant monitoring, assessment, and evaluation of changes to practices and policies are vital for promoting a peaceful curriculum and for gaining the support of peers, administrators, and the larger communities we serve to promote disruption and reform.

Future Directions

Although this article provides a starting point for the intersection of peace education and communication, as well as directions for dismantling violence in public speaking, more scholarship is needed. Both peace education and communication may provide essential avenues for expanding scholarship and practice in both disciplines. For example, social justice practices may benefit from intercultural communication research. Sustainable development education may benefit from scholarship and practices in the subfield of public relations. While Ellis and Warshel (2011) started the conversation about the contributions of communication and media studies to peace education, there are endless possibilities for educators and scholars at the intersection of peace education and communication.

Conclusion

Overall, as argued by this piece, the intersection of the field of communication and peace education has the potential to enhance the scholarship, education, and practices of scholars from both disciplines. Peace education provides a framework for understanding peace and violence in cultural, structural, and direct ways in the communication discipline. Communication provides the tools for engaging people in conversations about peace and dismantling hidden cultural and structural violence within the education system. It is important to note that these or any cultural changes must be accompanied by structural changes to avoid unanticipated or counterproductive effects (Kaomea, 2005).

As stated by Davies (2010), “It is always hypocritical of educational institutions to preach tolerance or peace when their own students are not given respect, or to preach democracy when they are hierarchical institutions, or to preach cooperation when they are fiercely competitive places” (p. 496). By exploring the intersection of peace education and the communication discipline within the context of communication center, we can start to build and foster equitable, empathetic, and culturally sensitive communication behaviors and skills in our students, our classrooms, our resource centers, and our campus communities.
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2. Intentionally lowercase as per the official name of the organization on the published document.
A Pedagogical Mystique?: Lessons of Incorporating Feminism Into Skills-Based Communication Courses

Daniela Molta, Regina Luttrell, and Christopher J. McCollough

Keywords: feminist pedagogy; skills-based course; corporate social responsibility; professional communications

Abstract: It is imperative that today’s advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations students are prepared to engage in corporate activism and corporate social responsibility communications once in the workforce. This article explores the need for incorporating equity-based pedagogy, using feminism as one of many approaches, into skills-based communication courses. The researchers conducted 20 qualitative interviews with academics to discuss various approaches, examples, and learnings. The findings suggest that using a feminist framework to teach skills: (1) enhances the skill being taught, (2) allows students to communicate more effectively, (3) builds life skills, and (4) comes in many forms. The article concludes with consideration to areas for future research and contributes to the understanding of academics engaged in a feminist approach to teaching skills-based communication courses.

Introduction

Preparing young professionals to enter the communication subfields means preparing them to account for diverse audiences in messaging, design, and dialog while preparing them to be self-reliant and confident in most communication contexts. Teaching through a feminist lens utilizing feminist pedagogy is one approach that offers a more empowering learning environment for students. By implementing feminist...
pedagogy, educators acknowledge the influence of race, class, sexual orientation, and geographical location on learners. With feminist pedagogy, students are given the ability to question norms which promotes social change—both within the student as well as society. Feminist pedagogy teaches students to explore their group identities, examine differences both inside and outside the classroom, and become aware of their various roles in domination, superiority, hierarchy, and exploitation. The approach, associated with the liberation movement, encourages not only self-reliance, but also an understanding of social equality.

The purpose of this study is to understand the approaches and experiences of professors who incorporate feminism pedagogy into skills-based courses in advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations programs. Feminist pedagogy centers on the importance of theory for understanding the world around us. In her seminal work, bell hooks (1994) argues for educational opportunities centered around learning theory which allows for the learner to become aware of their surroundings through engaging, interactive, and transgressive pedagogies. With this in mind, feminist pedagogy was chosen as one of many possible approaches to integrating equity into the classroom due to its ideological overlap with other equity-based theories, such as ethics of care and intersectionality. The term “feminist” in this paper refers to an ethical perspective that considers gender issues as central to culture and power (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; hooks, 1996a, 1996b; Weiler, 1991). Feminist pedagogy is a set of classroom practices grounded in critical pedagogical and feminist theory (Webb, et al., 2002; Weiler, 1991). A review of the literature reveals the discussion of teaching strategies that teach feminist ideas or have been done by self-identified feminists. The authors define a skills-based course as one with learning goals focused on building practical skills (Callister & Love, 2016).

Feminist theory can often be found in dedicated communication courses in gender or diversity. Communication includes the subfields of advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations, among others. Lacey and Smits (2015) offer “mainstreaming” as an alternative approach to incorporating feminist pedagogy across the curriculum (p. 256). Take advertising as an example. The curriculum can be divided into creative, media planning and buying, research, and strategy. The mainstream approach to teaching feminism would mean that every course would incorporate feminist teaching.

Feminist pedagogy should not be blindly incorporated into every communication course. Rather, we assert that feminist teaching, and equity more broadly, should be thoughtfully and practically integrated into courses where students are learning how to communicate to and with the public. Advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations shape culture, and therefore communication educators have an obligation to foster fair-minded, critical graduates.

**Framing the Pedagogy and Research Context**

Communication professionals are frequently confronted with decisions regarding their organization's purpose and role in society. Students need the critical thinking skills to address these issues. Porter Novelli (2020) reports 88% of U.S. business executives know that now, more than ever, companies must lead with purpose. Communication graduates will enter the workforce and be involved in conversations and decisions regarding the impact their work has on society.
Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate activism are ways that businesses self-regulate their impact on and role in society. CSR reflects the voluntary integration of social and environmental interests into day-to-day business activities and interactions with stakeholders (Bednárik, 2019; Chin et al., 2013; Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 8). Stakeholders extend beyond shareholders to include employees, communities, the environment, and society (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 8). Corporate activism, a form of CSR, is distinct because it aims to make societal change in the institutional environment (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020, p. 464). Often, corporate activism involves advocating for political, economic, and/or environmental reform (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Patagonia, the outdoor apparel brand, is driven by a set of strong corporate values that advocates for environmental protection, fair trade, and stricter labor standards. The company engages in both corporate social responsibility and corporate activism, including its Worn Wear initiative. The program allows customers to repair, trade-in, or buy used Patagonia apparel, in effect reducing consumption (Patagonia, n.d.). The practice of recycling and extending the life of goods positively impacts the environment and is a testament to the quality of Patagonia apparel. Worn Wear now has a dedicated section on the retailer’s website and has experimented with physical pop-up shops.

An example of corporate activism is Patagonia’s actions toward environmental protection legislation. In 2017, Patagonia swiftly opposed then President Trump’s reversal of protection of two national monuments in Utah in a blog post (Kenna, 2017), website takeover, and social media communication (Patagonia, 2017) encouraging Americans to act. Patagonia sued former President Trump, the secretary of the interior, the secretary of agriculture, the director of the Bureau of Land Management, and the chief of the Forest Service for unlawfully reducing national monuments, which Patagonia argued is solely the right of Congress (Gelles, 2018).

As future practitioners of communication, students must also be culturally competent. Cultural competence means understanding and communicating with people from different cultures (Jean-Baptiste, 2018). To achieve these responsibilities requires both theory and application in the classroom.

**The State of Corporate Social Responsibility**

When integrated into skills-based classrooms, feminist pedagogy’s examination of relationships of power in society prepares students to consider and implement CSRs critical role in business and society. The following data and literature offer insights about why integrating feminist principles in skills-based courses aid students in both personal and professional development.

**Consumer Expectations.** A mindset is taking hold where consumers see the products and services they buy as a representation of their values. This mindset prompts higher standards expected of companies, where some consumers believe brands should be held accountable to develop and live values, ultimately impacting society in a positive way. According to Edelman (2020), 73% of global respondents believe that a company can take actions that both increase profits and improve conditions in communities where it operates. In fact, ethical drivers are three times more important to company trust than competence (Edelman, 2020).

According to Porter Novelli (2020), 70% of Americans believe companies have more responsibility than ever before to address social justice issues. The top 10 issues Americans believe companies must address include employee health and safety (94%), access to health care (90%), privacy and internet security
Consumers confer immense trust and responsibility on businesses to address societal issues. Globally, businesses lead as the most trusted institution, ahead of NGOs, government, and media (Edelman, 2021). Globally, 86% of people expect CEOs to publicly speak out about one or more of these societal changes: pandemic impact, job automation, societal issues, and local community issues (Edelman, 2021).

Generation Z, consisting of people born between 1997–2012 (Dimock, 2019), lead the way in their belief that brands should act responsibly and express their values through action. In fact, 67% of young Americans (age 13–25) buy a product or service solely because they support the brand’s values (DoSomething Strategic, 2019). Generation Z wants to see brands engage in corporate activism by advocating for institutional change (Luttrell & McGrath, 2021). Further, 52% of Generation Z adults want the brands they use to be involved in activism, compared to only 17% of Baby Boomers (Dubina, 2021). The importance of CSR to the students that today’s professors serve, predominantly Generation Z, is another reason to prioritize teaching activism in skills-based classrooms (Luttrell et al., 2020).

**Employee Expectations.** Further, CSR is on the mind of people when considering companies to work for. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers (2021), 75% of people surveyed want to work for organizations that make positive contributions to society. Weber Shandwick and KRC Research (2018) report that 62% of U.S. communications and marketing executives are favorable of their own CEO taking a public position on issues.

Younger generations lead the way. Millennials will not take a job if a company does not have strong CSR values and 88% say their job is more fulfilling when provided opportunities to make positive impacts on social and environmental issues (Cone Communications, 2016). Research indicates that Millennials seek responsible workplaces due to their beliefs that “community extends beyond themselves” and focus on individual values over economic performance (Chatzopoulou & Kiewiet, 2021).

Generation Z, who share beliefs with Millennials on key social and political issues (Parker et al., 2019), made up 20.3% of the U.S. population in 2019 (The Brookings Institution, 2020) and are a large segment of the workforce. The youngest generation is expected to be the most racially and ethnically diverse generation (Fry & Parker, 2018), which informs their views on society. The value employees place on their employer’s impact on society make CSR and corporate activism key tools in employee recruitment and retention (Noguchi, 2018).

**Business Executive Directives.** The rising expectations and motivations of consumers and employees, in combination with a global pandemic and social unrest, have influenced U.S. business executives to consider a larger set of stakeholders. Porter Novelli (2020) reports 91% of U.S. business executives agree that business must benefit all stakeholders, not just shareholders. CSR has cemented its role in business. Further, 85% of U.S. business executives say it is no longer acceptable just to make money; companies must positively impact society (Porter Novelli, 2020). Business executives and U.S. consumers, respectively, agree that companies should address the following issues: sexual harassment (97%, 88%), racial equality (93%, 84%), women’s rights (89%, 83%), and LGBTQ+ rights (78%, 67%) (Porter Novelli, 2020).

The motivations of executives for engaging in CSR varies. Research indicates that executives’ belief in the CSR business case is based on a positive ideological view on the market economy, also known as
fair market ideology (Hafenbrädl & Waeger, 2017). Alternatively, research indicates that some CEOs have self-serving motivations for engaging in CSR efforts. CEO narcissism affects the focus of CSR activities, such that narcissistic CEOs are more likely to engage in external CSR efforts (Al-Shammari et al., 2019). Similarly, celebrity CEOs, those who have received celebrity status due to their strong business performance, engage in CSR efforts when the business is experiencing variability: uncertainty regarding the performance of the business, poor business performance, or high competition (Lee et al., 2020).

Corporate social responsibility and corporate activism are not going away. Public opinion will expand as the youngest generation becomes adults. As members of the workforce, our students will be expected to engage in these conversations as consumers, employees, and eventually leaders. It is imperative that educators of communication arm students with the theory, skills, and cultural competence to engage in business in today’s world.

**Lack of Existing Literature**

Consumer and employee expectations, combined with business executive directives, require communication professionals to be culturally competent to effectively succeed in a world of corporate social responsibility and corporate activism. Feminism, and other equity-based theories, are pedagogical approaches that can prepare students for the demands of the workforce.

Yet the literature review revealed limited scholarly contributions with a focus on teaching feminism or using feminist pedagogy specifically in a skills-based communication course. A communication course is defined as a course in the field of advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations.

A broader literature review did produce limited yet informative reflections and tips from educators incorporating feminist pedagogy into non-gender dedicated courses in the fields of business and management (Sang & Glasgow, 2016; Shelton, 2020) and politics (Lacey & Smits, 2015). The findings suggest that in business and management skills-based courses, academics face difficulties and resistance (Sang & Glasgow, 2016; Shelton, 2020) but also excitement (Sang & Glasgow, 2016) from students in the classroom. Additional reflections indicate that teaching feminism did not influence their relationships with colleagues but had a range of perceived negative and positive impacts on their career development (Sang & Glasgow, 2016). A separate article reporting on responses from participants from a plenary session at the 2014 New Zealand Political Studies Association conference highlights different approaches to incorporating feminism and intersectionality into politics departments and ponders whether feminist teaching is activism (Lacey & Smits, 2015).

The research questions underpinning this research are:

1. What are the motivations for incorporating feminist thought into skills-based communication courses?
2. What approaches are used to incorporate feminist thought into skills-based communication courses?
3. What are the learnings from incorporating feminist thought into skills-based communication courses?
Self-Disclosures

Self-disclosure is in line with intersectionality theory, which emphasizes that individuals are multidimensional (Crenshaw, 1989). Scholars emphasize the importance of transparency and articulating any potential subjectivity in identity-based research (Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013). Specifically, the notion that the researchers’ self-identities inform the research they conduct and the perspectives they bring to research.

Researchers of this project approach it from similar and different standpoints. Two researchers are women, and one is a man. All researchers transitioned from the public sector to academia, each covering one of the following fields of communication: advertising, communication, and public relations. All researchers believe communication professors should have a vested interest in integrating equity into skills-based course curriculum to prepare students to engage in equitable communication and the growing interest of CSR and diversity. A framework of self-disclosure and intersectionality in the classroom can afford students a glimpse into potential biases of the educator and prepare students for industry and workforce obstacles, respectively.

Materials and Methods

The purpose of this study is to understand and analyze the approaches and experiences of professors of communication (advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations) who incorporate feminist thought into skills-based courses. To do so, the researchers conducted 20 exploratory interviews (via video conference) of academics who incorporate feminism into skills-based communication courses. The exploratory interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix A) and were informed by previous literature on incorporation of feminist principles in education (Shrewsbury, 1993).

The composition of interviewees, broken down by gender, region, field of communication, and job title is outlined in Table 1 below. Participants skewed female (90%). The majority (75%) of participants teach at an institution in the East. The composition of fields of communication is well distributed: journalism (33%), public relations (26%), mass communication (22%), and advertising (19%). Finally, participants include assistant professors (41%), associate professors (18%), professors (18%), PhD students (14%), and chairs (9%).

The researchers utilized qualitative content analysis to identify themes (Patton, 2002) to better understand the incorporation of feminist themes in skills-based communication courses. The qualitative content analysis took place in four stages: decontextualization of the data, recontextualization of the data, categorization of the data into substantive themes, and compilation of findings in the write-up to ensure a thorough examination of the course descriptions (Berg, 2001; Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016). The intent of the four-stage examination was to achieve a latent analysis, in an effort to consider deeper meanings related to the philosophical focus and motivations of instructors incorporating feminism in skills-based communication courses (Berg, 2001). Frequent debriefing sessions (akin to intercoder reliability checks) between the researchers were employed to ensure validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the findings as categories of course content and approaches to teaching were established (Patton, 2002). For example, the researchers would independently analyze the transcribed
responses, identify themes that emerged in the responses, which enabled them to come together to discuss the themes identified and examples highlighted. Through each discussion, the researchers found consistency and clarity in interpretation of the themes, enabling them to develop the larger categorical themes by the third data review, which facilitated the finding reports below.

| TABLE 1 Composition of Research Participants (gender, region, field of communication, job title) |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Category** | **Number of Participants** | **Percentage of Total** |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 18 | 90% |
| Male | 2 | 10% |
| Region | | |
| NE | 8 | 40% |
| SE | 7 | 35% |
| W | 2 | 10% |
| SW | 2 | 10% |
| MW | 1 | 5% |
| Field of Communication | | |
| Journalism | 9 | 33% |
| Public Relations | 7 | 26% |
| Mass Comm | 6 | 22% |
| Advertising | 5 | 19% |
| Job Title | | |
| Assistant Professor | 9 | 41% |
| Associate Professor | 4 | 18% |
| Professor | 4 | 18% |
| PhD Student | 3 | 14% |
| Chair | 2 | 9% |

Note. The number of participants exceeds 20 when participants teach across fields or have more than one job title.

A participant profile can be found in Table 2. Pseudonyms are used to mask the identity of the participants.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Field of Comm</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Research Expertise</th>
<th>Teaching Expertise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Health communication</td>
<td>Research, strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Crisis communication, social media activism</td>
<td>Public relations core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Branded content, predictive TV ratings</td>
<td>Data analytics, media planning, strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Journalism, Mass Comm</td>
<td>PhD Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Associations communication</td>
<td>Public speaking, writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>MW</td>
<td>Public Relations, Mass Comm</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Celebrity culture</td>
<td>Mass comm, public relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>News women history, subaltern politics on the internet</td>
<td>Media literacy, media theory, social media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Advertising, Public Relations, Mass Comm</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Chair</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pedagogy, public relations</td>
<td>Advertising, political communication, public relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Advertising, Mass Comm</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gender in sports media</td>
<td>Race and gender in media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Newsroom sociology</td>
<td>Production, video editing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Journalism</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Journalism education</td>
<td>Journalism, editorial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>PhD Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Gender in sports media</td>
<td>Sports reporting, sports journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Advertising, Journalism, Public Relations</td>
<td>PhD Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Equitable pedagogies, critical media theory</td>
<td>Film, journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>SW</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>Chair and Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Intersectionality</td>
<td>Public relations core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>NE</td>
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<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Magazine, journalism, cultural criticism</td>
<td>Critical writing, magazine editing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>SW</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Representation of race/gender in media</td>
<td>Media theories, race and gender in media reporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pedagogy, public relations</td>
<td>Political comm, public relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Mass Comm</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Social justice in film</td>
<td>Film, production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Labor activism, TikTok</td>
<td>Public relations core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Mass Comm</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Women's sports communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Newsroom sociology, journalism ethics</td>
<td>Broadcast journalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants were recruited in two ways: (1) A call for participants was distributed on academic listservs and social media (Twitter); (2) Recruitment emails were sent to the authors’ contacts, contacts recommended by prospective and current participants, and academics whose research interests involve diversity, feminism, and/or intersectionality. The recruitment methods represent convenience sampling—“a type of nonprobability sampling in which people are sampled simply because they are ‘convenient’ sources of data for researchers” (Lavrakas, 2008). Convenience sampling allowed the researchers to find relevant participants who met the selective criteria of being a professor of communication (advertising journalism, mass communication, and public relations) who incorporate feminism into skills-based communication courses. The authors verified the specific skills-based communication courses that participants derived their experiences from, though this information is withheld from the study to uphold anonymity. Informed consent was obtained through email (ahead of) or verbally (at the beginning of) the interviews.

**Results**

**Teaching Feminism Often Means Teaching Equity and Life Skills**

For many participants, teaching feminism extends beyond gender to equity across social identities which could include ability, class, ethnicity, gender, race, and sexuality. It was widely acknowledged that bias and inequities are prevalent outside of gender. Educators have the opportunity to introduce students to a wide variety of issues, while preparing them to exercise critical thinking skills that will enable them to be agents of change for the better in the profession. Many understand feminism to coincide with equal rights, representation of and opportunity for all communities, and, as such, take a broader perspective on what it means to teach feminism.

When asked about her approach to integrating feminism into a skills-based communication course, professor of journalism, Participant 6, explained that in the classroom she emphasizes that feminism stands for everybody and that “we’re in this together.” Participant 6 teaches in a conservative area and reflected on student appreciation she received after discussing LGBTQ+ representation in media narratives. She paraphrased: “This student sent me an email, and said, “Thank you, it’s been a really tough year, and this is the only time when I felt actually comfortable and seen” (Participant 6). Creating space for dialogue and discourse is an intentional decision for Participant 6. She adds:

> If we’re not approaching our classes with an eye toward what we’re doing, our students are at a disservice. Students want to talk about these things; They need to talk about these things in a safe space where they know they’re not going to be completely shut down. (Participant 6)

The intention of many participants is to use the university setting, where many students are becoming aware of social issues for the first time, to broaden and give space to explore their understanding of society. In doing so, students learn both professional and life skills that allow them to lead and live with empathy.

Participant 13 suggests that teaching feminism is about getting students to challenge norms and structures. Participant 13 intentionally creates space for students of various identities (e.g., students of color, LGBTQ+) to discuss their differences. Participant 13 perceives the result to be a classroom where students feel protected and encouraged to engage in healthy dialogue:
When I have students who have differences, they can address those things and you can have those conversations. They know that they feel protected because the professor is willing not just to have their back, but to encourage a healthy conversation and dialogue.

To some, teaching feminism is also about teaching life skills.

Participant 14 said: “I believe it is a duty of academic institutions to train people not just for the work that they’re going to do, but how they’re going to move through the world.”

Similarly, Participant 5 explained that part of her role as an educator is to assist students in being informed citizens. She does so by teaching media literacy and integrating critical cultural discourse and inclusivity in the classroom. Participant 5 explains:

I think a very large part of our job is to keep them informed as citizens. How do you deconstruct a news story? How do you know what’s considered a good news source? How do you see the role of PR playing into the news business? So I wear a few hats. . . . These are all very, very real issues that I think this particular generation of students, I hope, are more cognizant of.

### Motivations for Incorporating Feminism Vary

To understand participants’ reasons for incorporating feminism into a skills-based communication course, we asked, “Why do you teach feminism in a skills-based course?” Participants’ motivations range on a spectrum from personal to practical, as summarized in Figure 1. While the intent was to create differentiated categories, there is inherent overlap between categories and motivations.

![Motivations for Incorporating Feminism Into Skills-Based Communication Courses](image)

**Personal Motivations**

**Identify as Feminist.** Some participants say that feminism is not something that they can “turn off.” Participant 13 comes from a lineage of Black women who mentored and educated her in different ways. She reflects on how Black Feminism is ingrained in her and how it shows up in the classroom: through a warm demeanor; by acknowledging where students are; by shining light on systemic issues while encouraging students to overcome them and do better.

**Lived Experiences.** Another recurring theme was driven by lived experiences as past students and practitioners of communication. Many participants emphasized the lack of attention to bias and
inequities in their own undergrad, graduate, and doctoral programs and how, as a result, they were not equipped to navigate injustices when entering the profession. These participants now feel an obligation to prepare students for the realities of the industry. Participant 14 explained how issues of injustice were not brought up during her experience in journalism school and the disappointment of facing them when entering the industry.

Participant 15 reflected on the discrimination she faced in the profession when she realized men (who joined at the same level of her) were getting promotions faster. Looking back, she realized that she didn’t know how to ask for a promotion and speak up for herself. Participant 15 now shares these stories with students to build awareness among both men and women who will eventually have the opportunity to affect change. Participant 15 and others stressed the importance of striking a balance when talking about these topics with students. Inherently, the process of making students aware of the realities of injustices in the profession could discourage students from entering the field.

**Personal Responsibility.** A third theme was the personal responsibility that the participants have, as educators, to teach critical thinking skills. A professor of public relations who emphasizes critical thinking in skills-based courses, Participant 13 expressed how the philosophical mindset of advertising and public relations departments can hinder holistic learning:

> For junior faculty and graduate students, the biggest problem is the structure of academia and the structure of the departments we’re in, where we are (especially within advertising and PR) so very corporate minded. We’re sending out good soldiers to be on the work battlefield for these companies. That’s fine, but they also need to be critical thinkers.

**Research Interests.** A final personal motivation was related to participants’ research interests. Educators whose research interests involve gender and intersectionality, for example, felt inclined to incorporate their learnings and research in the classroom. Participant 20 expressed her passion for studying intersectionality in journalism:

> I live it and I research it but there’s so much more to intersectionality that needs to be understood from a sexuality standpoint, you know, and from a racial standpoint, an economic standpoint and so thinking of all these intersections is so important.

**Practical Motivations**

**Student Population.** Some participants emphasize equity because of the student population they serve. Many interviewed serve a majority female student body—nearly two thirds, or 64% of communication students are female (Borruto, 2015). Some participants are driven to prepare students for inequities that females might face once in the industry.

Participant 7 emphasized issues of wage and equity and teaches students about their right and responsibility to negotiate pay:

> From an industry and professional standpoint, it’s helping young women understand what the industry is like, some of the challenges they can anticipate, thinking about issues of wage and equity and having a conversation around that, teaching them about their right and responsibility to negotiate when they go out on the job market as an entry level and not being afraid to do it.
Participant 15 casts light on sexual harassment in her classroom. She shares her own experience with it and how it placed a burden on her ability to do her job:

We talk a lot about the kinds of pressures that women face that men might not face, and we do get into sexual harassment, which is a big factor. I tell them that I experienced it myself when I was a journalist and that it really can put a burden on you when you're just trying to do your job.

Educators with diverse student bodies expressed how being selective with course content allows students to see themselves represented in media and the profession. Participant 20 identifies as a cisgendered heterosexual White woman that grew up middle-class and went to a predominately White university. As an educator at a diverse school in the South, she finds it important to select guest speakers who sound different and have different experiences than her.

Participant 6, however, is an educator with a predominantly conservative student body in the Midwest who feels obligated to expose her students to new diverse perspectives. She has received encouraging feedback from students, which she paraphrased as: “I’ve never had a chance to talk about these things, or to really think about these ideas and thank you, because it really helped me understand and talk with other people” (Participant 6).

Enhancement of the Skill. A second practical reason for incorporating feminism into a skills-based course is that it enhances the skill being taught. With an eye toward equity and inclusion, practitioners communicate more effectively. Participant 7 explained how ethics of care can be used as a framework to inform relationship management, relationship building, and conflict resolution. He feels that it allows him to extend beyond what is referenced in the PRSA Code of Ethics (PRSA, n.d.). Linked to feminist theory, ethics of care is a theory that emphasizes that everyone has a voice that should be listened to carefully and with respect (Gilligan, 2011).

Participant 10 believes that a feminist framework aids businesses in being more collaborative and inclusive. She adds:

If you look at . . . putting a feminist framework on an organization, then that organization by design is . . . more collaborative instead of hierarchical and . . . tries to be . . . empathetic and supportive of each other and more inclusive.

Requirement in Today’s World. The final practical motivation is because it is required in today’s world where CSR and inclusivity in communication and media are at the forefront of culture and society. Participant 14 explained that inclusivity and equity are demands of the magazine and news media market. Similarly, Participant 6 stresses to her students that equity is a big conversation in the workplace, and advises:

If you can’t do it here, you’re not going to be able to identify it in the media, you’re not going to be able to write about it, you're not gonna be able to produce a video about it, your social media is going to have a huge hole.
An Equity Framework Enhances the Skill

A recurring theme was that equity and skills are not two separate frameworks forced together. Instead, teaching communication skills with consideration to equity and/or feminism strengthens the skill. As communication professors, we are teaching students how best to communicate with society. Without a focus on equity and inclusion, how can we communicate fairly?

Participant 12 explained how she incorporates a theoretical perspective on equity in her introduction to digital storytelling course:

What I’ve been trying to do is for each lesson, include some kind of theoretical perspective from filmmaking in to incorporate some kind of approach that adds to equity . . . my lighting portion . . . is a little bit more focused on equity and race, and making sure that we’re teaching students how to light people of color in different ways than they light white people.

Participant 16 frames feminism and intersectionality as “practical tools for them to navigate communicating in diverse environments and within diverse organizations and to diverse audiences.” Participant 8 explained how a feminist framework helps advertising students understand their target audiences:

Students need to understand how you develop an understanding of who your target audience is within advertising, and so I approached it from the perspective of you need to know who your audience is and, you know, 52% of the population is female. So you should have some sense about if you aren’t female yourself, then you should have some understanding of that as a target audience.

Many participants believe that an eye toward equity and inclusivity that is engrained in feminist thought improves the quality of the communication skill being taught. This sentiment was shared across communication disciplines: advertising, journalism, mass communication, and public relations.

There’s Balance to Be Had

Participants shared a variety of approaches to integrating feminism into a skills-based communication course that range from vague to explicit. Some participants do not label content as feminist and instead teach through a broad lens of equity. The benefit expressed by some is that the content is more digestible for students who consider feminism too political or radical. The potential drawback is that some students may not grasp the diversity lens that frames the content. Participant 18 calls it the “dog medicine approach,” where she sprinkles equity in various ways throughout the semester. For example, guest speakers, projects, and student reflections. Participant 12, for example, acknowledged that she’s nervous to be more explicit because students might feel that there’s too much theory in a skills-based course.

Conversely, other participants label feminism. This can show up in class by sharing one’s feminist identity with students, labeling one’s approach as feminist, and labeling feminist theories. The benefits of this approach are that it can debunk what feminism means and gives credit to the feminist movement and scholars who have contributed to it. The drawbacks are some students will consider the course to be too political or radical, which may build a barrier to teaching the skill. Participant 16 expressed the importance of ensuring the voices who brought us feminist theories are still at the center of discussion.
For example, when teaching intersectionality, he will begin by allowing students to hear from Kimberlé Crenshaw and explaining the theory’s root in violence against Black women and eventually work toward the professional application.

The decision to incorporate feminism into a skills-based classroom depends on the educator. The educator’s rank is one consideration. Participant 13 expressed that not all academics will welcome this approach to teaching skills, and junior faculty, in particular, should be aware of potential pushback. Participant 11, an instructor of journalism, would like to see more institutional support and encouragement to incorporate feminism into the curriculum:

There’s a lot of support for these ideas [equity] among the faculty, especially the tenured faculty versus the adjuncts who are in the industry and less attuned. . . . It’s sort of just an understanding that people are taking it up on their own and doing it versus having the support to do it versus . . . you know ideas for how to put it in the curriculum or even like “Oh, you should be putting this in the curriculum.”

**Importance of Course-Wide Integration**

As Carolyn Shrewsbury (1993) notes, “feminist pedagogy is a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practice by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals or outcomes” (p. 8). This assertion is aligned with what we found during our interview process. Participants stressed the importance of integrating feminism throughout the curriculum and semester rather than a day on “intersectionality theory,” for example. The perspective comes from awareness that the skill and theory should be intertwined. Isolation of feminist ideologies doesn’t enhance the skills and can alienate the content. Likewise, many participants prepare students in the beginning of the semester that they will teach with a framework toward equity in communication.

Participant 16 reflects that intersectionality and other diversity-centered discussions are often left to the end of semester, which siphons it off and leaves little room for application. Instead, he brings up these topics early and applies them throughout the semester. He explains:

There are a lot of challenges to squeezing everything in at the beginning, but I’ve tried to bring this up within the first two to three weeks of class to address that feeling specifically . . . Then we can keep talking about these issues as it applies to a lot of different scenarios across the course of the semester, whether that’s a bunch of different writing assignments, or a bunch of different kinds of management or campaigns related issues that pop up. (Participant 16)

**Wide Variety of Application**

Participants shared a range of ways to incorporate feminist ideologies into skills-based communication courses. Participant 10 emphasized the importance of careful consideration to class materials:

What we select carries a lot of weight and what we say is good carries a lot of weight in some ways. We are . . . tastemakers for our students and calling attention to, you know, in my case . . . really great journalism that . . . is done by a woman and/or person of color, that matters.
**Guest Speakers**

Participant 18 is intentional about who she brings into the classroom. When thinking about diversity in guest speakers, she considers a variety of factors:

> Especially with guest speakers, I've always been very intentional about bringing them [into] the classroom and making sure that they're coming from diverse experiences. Not just from race and gender but also . . . How they got to their position; Did they take a traditional track?; Are they first gen? (Participant 18)

Participant 10 emphasized the importance of inviting guest speakers who are in underrepresented groups. She shared the perspective that doing so allows more students to see a version of themselves as a leader and normalizes diversity in leadership:

> I used to think about it as . . . “I want all students to see a version of themselves at some point in school,” as . . . a boss or a leader or whatever it is. I was taking the class once and a fellow student who was Black said it’s also important for other students to see those people in those positions, and not be a big deal that they’re in those positions. And she was right. (Participant 10)

**Case Studies**

Participant 20 tries in the classroom to illustrate that there's space for all kinds of people in broadcasting. Rather than selecting examples of broadcasters who portray the norm, she will find examples of people pushing the boundaries. She elaborated:

> I always like to tell students: this is the norm, these are people who are pushing against it. Whether that be women can't wear big giant jewelry, and here's a woman of color who's pushing against that. Or, braids are not okay. Or, you know, nonbinary persons can't wear bow ties . . . and so showing examples of people who are pushing back against it. (Participant 20)

**Assignments**

Participant 17 uses the Bechdel-Wallace Test, a measure of the representation of women in fiction, in her film production course. To pass the test, which brings attention to gender inequality in entertainment, the work must meet the following criteria: (1) it must have at least two women in it, who (2) talk to each other, about (3) something other than a man (Garber, 2015). Participant 17 explained that “most movies fail that test. So, I don’t do it in every semester, but there have been semesters where I will have the students apply that test to anything that they’re making.”

Participant 12 asks that students look beyond stereotypical portrayals to intentional use of characters in storytelling. She provided the following example:

> We especially talk about . . . romantic beats and how we should like try to work on creating those romantic beats without creating shots that are literally only to gaze at women. . . . These shots need to actually be motivated by something other than looking at a pretty, beautiful, usually white woman. (Participant 12)
Participant 8 created a group assignment in her advertising course that challenges students to think about the way gender functions in society:

I . . . assign each group what is a typically male or female targeted product—so things like feminine hygiene products or I used jock itch cream one year—and then I would have them develop a questionnaire of like, half of your group probably has experience with this product, and the other half probably doesn't so how would you go about eliciting information from those who do so that you can develop insights about the product?

Participant 1 approaches teaching how to define a target audience in advertising by requiring that students begin with behaviors and psychographics rather than demographics:

I never let them start with, “Okay we're . . . going to target women to an age of 18 to 35,” because my question will always be “Why?” . . . I only allow them to bring those demographics out of those other things.

The intentional selection of class materials including guest speakers, case studies, and assignments are forms of teaching feminism in a skills-based classroom.

**Implications Beyond the Classroom**

Feminist pedagogy is more about a way of life rather than merely a theory within a classroom setting. In Estelle Freedman's (2007) text, *No turning back: The history of feminism and the future of women*, she clearly articulates the central purpose of feminism as both ideology and social movement:

Feminism is the belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between men and women, with the understanding that gender always intersects with social hierarchies.” (p. 7)

Through this type of instruction, students are given the opportunity to examine relationships of power in society and contextualize their own center of being. This in turn has an impact outside of the classroom after the course ends.

One of the seminal aspects of feminist pedagogy is the ability to create a community in which students can empower one another. Leading through a feminist lens provides leadership opportunities for both women and allies, be they scholarly or elsewhere, by creating an environment open to all genders that might result in positive changes. For many, the ideals of community and empowerment is central to activism and achieving social change. Feminist pedagogy seeks social justice in teaching and learning; looks for ways to include marginalized voices that are typically left out of the dominant discourse; encourages student empowerment by engaging their lived experiences (Morley, 2019; Rohrer, 2018; Shackelford, 1992; Weiler, 1991). This can take place through critical dialogues about equity/oppression, diversity, and access at multiple intersections, which challenges oppression in all forms. Beyond the classroom, community, empowerment, and leadership are central to feminism and feminist pedagogy, both the avenue by which emancipation of women is achieved and the educators who help achieve that goal. The awareness of social inequities and experience with feminist ideals such as community and
empowerment arms students with tools to address the social responsibility of corporations and more effectively communicate with publics once they are out of the classroom and in the field.

Feminist pedagogy can empower students to actively strive for revolutionizing thought. Educators should be praxis-oriented, meaning taking time to gather relevant data, trying to understand how privilege influences both their teaching style and curriculum preferences, while simultaneously creating a safe environment in which students can speak openly about these concepts. Feminism goes beyond the narrow concern with achieving equality of opportunity within existing power relations. Feminism is also about exploring, promoting, and refining the already recognized consciousness of women’s systemic rights (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). Feminist pedagogy challenges traditional ways of teaching perspectives on knowledge, curriculum, texts, and assessment processes that exist in the classroom (Jones, 2018). An important goal of feminist pedagogy is to empower students and other marginalized people (Johnson, 2003). This should be achieved both inside and outside of the classroom.

**Discussion**

The growing expectation of consumers, employees, and other publics for companies to contribute to society beyond products and services, and to effectively communicate with the public about these efforts and other initiatives, suggest the need for communication professionals to develop skill in empathy, cultural competence, and a sense of equity. The researchers’ belief that integrating feminist theory into communication classrooms helps to shape future culturally competent communication professionals is reinforced by the participants’ responses, which also reinforce feminism’s potential to create equity in the classroom by laying bare potential barriers and forms of privilege and encouraging students to challenge normative practices and thinking.

The findings illustrate that participants perceive feminist teaching in a skills-based communication course to enhance the skills being taught. The reason for this, the participants suggest, is because a framework toward feminism—often including other communities outside of gender—has the power to build critical thinking skills and empathy that prepare students for the demands of industry. The thinking goes, the more one understands biases and inequities and can empathize with their intended audience, the more effective their communication in the profession will be. Further, given that many communication subfields are well-populated by women, a feminist lens also helps students to see and challenge the barriers put before young women trying to work in the industry, whether as an ally or a woman.

Another clear finding was a firm sense of personal identification of the educators as women or as allies of those treated inequitably, and the sense of personal responsibility that comes with this identity when deciding to integrate feminist principles and theory into skills-based courses. This finding suggests an opportunity for deeper examination of identity and its impact on teaching and learning. The researchers acknowledge that this calls for a deeper examination of assessment and assessment outcomes to understand the potential impact on students’ affective, cognitive, or behavioral learning.

The findings create an understanding of how feminist theory is currently being integrated in the communication classroom, an area of study that is lacking research. Findings indicate there are different approaches to incorporating feminism into skills-based courses—ranging from those that
do so intentionally to those that do so but may not label it as such. The variety of approaches used reinforces the findings in political studies that there isn't a streamlined approach (Lacey & Smits, 2015) and findings in business and management studies that some participants are cognizant of faculty and/or student resistance and career development (Sang & Glasgow, 2016; Shelton, 2020) when choosing a personal approach. This presents an opportunity for institutional support for faculty who teach skills-based classes through a lens of equity. One suggestion is a more exhaustive examination of curricular development to see a bigger picture of where and how feminism and other forms of critical theory on race, class, and equity are being integrated in communication classrooms.

The range of approaches and examples of incorporating feminism into a skills-based communication course reveal that teaching feminism comes in many forms. There is a balancing act for educators in how intently they focus on feminist themes in skills-based courses, where some will directly discuss some themes, while others choose to integrate principles with more subtlety and nuance. The researchers conclude that there is no right way to incorporate feminism into a skills-based communication course. The decision to do so, and which approach to take, depends on the educator. One clear finding, however, was that educators interviewed almost universally agree feminism should be integrated across a curriculum, rather than relegated to stand-alone lessons or courses. Educators who are considering incorporating feminism for the first time, or enhancing their practice of doing so, should explore all the possibilities and do so in a way that is true to themselves. Further, the researchers acknowledge that feminism is one among several meaningful approaches that can be employed to help skill build in empathy, empower students, and ensure equity in the classroom. It would be worthwhile to explore comparatively and independently how other forms of critical theory are being integrated and their impact on student learning experiences, both from the instructors’ and students’ perspectives. Our colleagues have developed inventive approaches to teaching feminism in a way that informs and enhances skills. The academy would benefit from this knowledge through teaching briefs.

Given the qualitative nature of the methods, we cannot generalize the findings across all communication schools. The participant profile is skewed toward female participants who teach at schools in the East. Low participation among men is an indicator of opportunity to incorporate feminist pedagogy into skills-based classrooms.

The title of the call for participants, “Participants Needed: Teaching Feminism in a Skills-Based Communications Course,” may have alienated those who incorporate feminist thought into a skills-based communication course but do not label it as such. If the intent is to learn from those who use a vaguer approach to teaching feminism through a lens of equity, future research recruitment should consider defining what it means to “teach feminism.” Alternatively, it would be wise to add an interview question asking participants, “How do you define feminism?” Understanding the specific or broad nature of participants’ responses can help to frame the range of approaches to and motivations for feminist teaching.

Limitations acknowledged, this study has revealed an encouraging range of approaches and experiences of professors who weave feminism, and equity more broadly, into skills-based communication courses. While findings indicate that there isn’t an overwhelming approach or experience, we hope academics will find ways to experiment with doing so to enhance practical skills and prepare students for the demands of the workforce.
A Pedagogical Mystique?: Lessons of Incorporating Feminism Into Skills-Based Communication Courses

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Appendix A

Structured Interview Questions

1. What’s your relationship to feminism?

2. Why do you teach feminism in a skills-based course?

3. What’s your approach to teaching feminism in a skills-based course?

4. From what ideology(s) do you teach feminism?

5. Do you encounter encouragement or hurdles when teaching feminism in a skills-based course?

6. What are your learnings from teaching feminism in a skills-based course?
Assessing Student Mindset, Interest, Participation, and Rapport in the Post-Pandemic Public Speaking Classroom: Effects of Modality Change and Communication Growth Mindset

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Keywords: mindset, modality, rapport, participation, interest

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic created an exigency for educators to reevaluate their approaches to the classroom with one major dimension being course modality. This study uses the Instructional Beliefs Model to examine the impacts of course modality (i.e., hybrid versus face-to-face formats) and students’ communication growth mindset on student engagement in the foundational public speaking course. Consistent with pre-COVID-19 findings, the results indicated that modality does not significantly impact student engagement, with one exception: higher cognitive interest scores were reported among students in the hybrid modality. Communication growth mindset associated positively with all student engagement variables examined: student interest–emotional, student interest–cognitive, participation, and class rapport. The findings offer tentative optimism about the promise of blended public speaking course modalities, and evidence for the necessity of mindset intervention to maximize student success.
Introduction

The adoption of virtual instruction affordances has been in motion for decades in U.S. higher education, but the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created the need for an expedited mass transition to online learning (Clark & Jones, 2001; Vanhorn et al., 2008). Two years on, online and hybrid offerings of courses that were once taught F2F at U.S. universities persist (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021), presenting a need and opportunity for pedagogical renewal. Decades of research explored online versus F2F teaching within the collegiate setting (e.g., Soffer & Nachmias, 2018; Virtue, 2017). However, research prior to the pandemic cannot fully account for pandemic-era teaching challenges, such as shifting student motivation, inattention, and negative attitudes (Helvie-Mason, 2020; McDermott & Ashby-King, 2021; Schwartzman, 2020; Spradley & Spradley, 2021). Research is therefore needed that takes up shifting student views that shape how they enter the classroom, like mindset, while also attending to course modality. Further, there are specific instructional design limitations for courses abruptly forced online (and those that never returned), which are not accounted for in past study of courses intentionally constructed for online or hybrid delivery based on best practices. Resultingly, scholars have called for additional exploration that helps improve hybrid teaching practices—whereby some learning activities take place in the typical F2F setting with a smaller portion of the content delivered in a mediated format (Barker, 2015)—to ensure this mode can benefit students in these settings as well as F2F instruction (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Mahmood, 2021). As universities nationwide respond to the new normal brought about by the pandemic, changes in our students, and the inherent challenges faced by faculty (Helvie-Mason, 2020), it is imperative to examine the impact of pedagogical changes on students and renew our understanding of F2F versus hybrid instruction.

With the demands of the pandemic, the foundational public speaking communication courses implemented variations of blended, F2F, and online structures. Changes in the public speaking courses need to be attended to as Hingle et al. (2021) noted that “oral communication skills are essential to undergraduate students’ academic success, sense of belonging at their university and employability after graduation” (p. 1, see also Morreale et al., 2016; Weismann et al., 2018). Considering that public speaking classes have implications for university retention (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2020), fulfill general education requirements, and introduce students to the Communication field (Neff, 2013), it is crucial to examine these courses and the impact of shifting modality. Moreover, as COVID research has illustrated the impact of the changing college student (Meluch et al., 2022), we look to mindset to attend to student characteristics shaping the class.

We theoretically frame our study using the Instructional Beliefs Model (Weber et al., 2011). By examining several variables that have been linked to student engagement, including student interest (Mazer, 2013), participation (Frymier & Houser, 2016), and rapport (Frisby & Martin, 2010), in relation to different modalities (hybrid versus F2F) and mindset, we can determine what aspects of the post-COVID classroom are making the most impact. In the next sections, we review the major tenets of the Instructional Beliefs Model; the literature on learning modalities; (communication) mindset; and student engagement variables of interest, participation, and rapport.
Review of Literature

Instructional Beliefs Model

The Instructional Beliefs Model (IBM) is founded on traditional instructional communication concepts and offers a clear, linear framework for explaining what leads to student learning outcomes within the classroom (Weber et al., 2011). The IBM posits that teacher behaviors (e.g., relevance, clarity, nonverbal immediacy), classroom contextual issues (e.g., classroom justice, modality), and student characteristics (e.g., communication apprehension) together predict student instructional beliefs, such as how one should engage in the classroom. Instructional beliefs serve as the mediating variable between the first-order variables listed previously and ultimate student learning outcomes within the classroom (Weber et al., 2011).

Previous research has demonstrated that the IBM provides a holistic view of student learning (Frisby & Housley Gaffney, 2015; Goldman & Martin, 2014). Scholars have supported the use of IBM research in online learning and have provided suggestions to revise the IBM for future theoretical development (Kaufmann et al., 2016; Wombacher et al., 2017). Kaufmann et al. go as far as to argue for the collapsing of instructor behaviors and classroom contextual issues when examining the online classroom, suggesting a further need to examine how the IBM functions within different learning modalities.

To do so, the present study examines the components derived from Weber et al.’s (2011) initial theoretical framework but focuses on classroom contextual issues, modality, as well as student characteristics as we work to renew our understanding of student outcomes. As instructors nationwide continue to navigate the changing classroom environment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to determine whether the existing framework of IBM is still upheld in adapted approaches to teaching and learning, such as hybrid classrooms.

Examining Learning Modalities

The online classroom and its presumed effectiveness have become a focus of research in instructional communication (Broeckelman-Post et al., 2019; Kaufmann et al., 2016; Vanhorn et al., 2008). Yet, scholars still “presume face-to-face as the yardstick” for evaluations of effectiveness (Schwartzman, 2020, p. 513), thus, creating a standard in which the “other” of online classes is used only as a factor of comparison (Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017; Tichavsky et al., 2015). This assumption is complicated, however, by the increasingly complex configuration of learning modalities incorporated into collegiate classrooms, such as F2F, HyFlex, BlendFlex, blended, and hybrid (Miller et al., 2020). The present study compares the fully F2F modality to the hybrid classroom—an instructional approach where most of the time is spent in a traditional classroom, lab, or other physical setting, and the rest of the time is spent participating in computer-mediated learning (Barker, 2015). The hybrid public speaking classroom has been examined previously (Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017; Broeckelman-Post et al., 2020), yet little work has been produced since the onset of the pandemic.

Broeckelman-Post et al. (2020) identified differences depending on modality among second-order variables from IBM (student engagement, attendance), yet no differences among instructional beliefs (self-reported competency) or student outcomes (exam grades and course performance). Their findings depart slightly from other scholarship that noted no differences in learning between the online public speaking course and the F2F public speaking classroom (Broeckelman-Post & Pyle., 2017; Nortvig et
Beyond the public speaking course, research has parsed the nuanced differences between modalities with Goke et al. (2021) finding that student opinions about course modality impact their motivation, mindset, and learning outcomes. These findings provide a basis for further investigation into modality differences. This line of research escalates in importance given that students recently reported a preference for asynchronous and synchronous classes (Brophy et al., 2021). In addition, Kirschner (2021) called for further research that can guide teachers toward a new, post-pandemic pedagogy for the increasingly high-tech affordances of the higher education classroom. As modality can impact learning in complex ways, it is imperative to understand how this may appear in the context of the public speaking course post pandemic.

**Mindset**

As scholars have observed the shifting attitudes and engagement of our students post-COVID (McDermott & Ashby-King, 2021; Schwartzman, 2020; Spradley & Spradley, 2021), additional scrutiny is needed of first order student characteristics that may account for some of these shifts, such as *mindset*. Emerging from the field of psychology (Dweck et al., 1995), mindset is conceived as a personal attribute influencing how individuals evaluate and make sense of the events occurring in the world around them (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Specifically, mindset refers to whether traits are viewed as either innate (i.e., fixed mindset) or adaptable (i.e., growth mindset) (Dweck et al., 1995). Individuals endorsing fixed mindsets perceive skills, such as mathematic proficiency or communication competence, as intrinsic traits or abilities, whereas those holding growth mindsets believe that these capacities can be cultivated (Dweck, 2006). Mindset has been found to robustly impact students’ learning, as it influences how they set their educational goals and enact behaviors to achieve them (Burnette et al., 2013). Bowman and Levto (2020) argued that students with a growth mindset are more resilient, seeking out greater challenges and approaching them as learning opportunities. In contrast, those students endorsing a fixed mindset interpret academic challenges as (demotivating) evidence of their own lack of ability. Mindset research has extended beyond academic performance to speak to issues of social skill and personality (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), suggesting the relevance of mindset in a multitude of areas and setting the foundation for modifying assessment of mindset to specific contexts. Yeager and Dweck further argue that mindset is most salient in academic stressful situations, which Nordin (2021) suggests includes the introductory communication course with its public performances.

Given the established connection between mindset and instructional and student outcomes, Nordin and Broeckelman-Post (2019) first adapted mindset for study of communication-specific learning, developing the Communication Mindset scale. *Communication mindset* refers to one’s view of the malleability of their own communication and public speaking skills. Nordin and Broeckelman-Post (2019) differentiated between mindset and efficacy: efficacy refers to a student’s perceived extant capacity, whereas mindset deals with the perceived possibility of change. This difference is important, because although students entering a communication classroom exhibit variability in existing communication skills, according to mindset theory, those who believe they have the possibility for change at the start of the term likely approach the course differently. Though mindset at large has been established as an important construct, attending to communication mindset in the foundational course allows researchers to focus on key course outcomes. However, Nordin and Broeckelman-Post (2020) noted that the public speaking course does not serve as an intervention for mindset, finding no changes in mindset over the semester, thus reinforcing the view of mindset as a trait variable. Understanding mindset as more trait-like, we can then envision it as part of the IBM as a student characteristic.
Some communication scholars have examined mindset in instructional communication research (Elkins, 2016; Stewart et al., 2017), yet this construct has not been fully utilized. Researchers found that mindset is associated with higher speech grades, higher interpersonal communication competence, lower public speaking anxiety, increased student engagement (Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2019), and higher self-perceived competence in the foundational communication course (Stewart et al., 2017).

To better understand the impact of mindset, we further examine its relationship with student engagement. Nordin and Broeckelman-Post (2019) utilized Reeve’s (2013) framework of engagement to establish mindset’s clear impact on the variable. Through this lens, engagement includes four subdimensions: emotional engagement (e.g., student interest–emotional), cognitive engagement (e.g., student interest–cognitive), behavioral engagement (e.g., participation), and agentic engagement, where students contribute “transactionally and dialectically” (Reeves, 2013, p. 580, likely shown in increased relational outcomes like rapport). To explicate nuanced effects of mindset on sub components of student engagement, we examine four dimensions corresponding to those suggested by Reeves (2013): student interest–emotional, student interest–cognitive, participation, and rapport.

**Student Interest**

Student interest has been examined in educational scholarship for over a century (Dewey, 1916; Mazer, 2012). In contrast, communication research has only turned its attention toward this variable within the last few decades. Mazer (2012) argued that student interest is situational, “triggered in the moment by certain conditions (e.g., textual material or teacher behavior) in the environment” and, therefore, tends to be common across all individuals experiencing that same condition (p. 101). Additionally, there are two types of student interest: emotional—which “builds when the addition of interesting but irrelevant material to a lesson energizes students so that they learn more”—and cognitive—which “builds when clarity indicators such as explanative summaries influence students’ cognition” (p. 102). The impact of student interest on their learning has been linked to increased motivation in the classroom (Bolkan & Griffin, 2018) and positive student outcomes (Frisby, Weber, & Beckner, 2014). Both findings uphold the relationships between student characteristics, instructional beliefs, and student learning identified in the IBM within the F2F classroom, making it a strong variable to examine when testing the IBM.

Instructional communication scholarship has examined the impact of key variables on student interest (Mazer, 2017; Weber, 2003). Mazer (2013) found that both teacher immediacy and clarity impact student interest, with immediacy having more impact on emotional interest and clarity holding more on cognitive interest. In this same study, Mazer determined a positive relationship between student interest and engagement which is replicated and expanded upon by Frisby, Weber, & Beckner (2014) who noted student participation increases with student interest. However, in the same way that positive teacher behaviors aid in student interest, teacher misbehaviors can decrease student interest in the classroom (Broeckelman-Post et al., 2016). Though a depth of research exists on teacher traits and interest, scholars have not offered the same depth in exploring classroom contextual issues. Notably, across all these studies, no instructional communication work has attempted to determine whether these relationships between other variables and student interest hold true in teaching environments besides F2F learning. While some research in the field of education has found student interest to remain high in classes that have remained online since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Jia et al., 2021), recent research does not look at the nuanced relationship between interest and other variables that are seen in previous research.
Participation

With students less engaged after the pandemic, a return to research necessitates further exploration of participation. Participation is central to the interaction between students and teachers. Fassinger (1995) defined student participation as any utterance from a student during class. However, Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) expanded upon Fassinger’s definition of participation by including five additional components: preparation, group skills, discussion contribution, communication skills, and attendance. As the definition of student participation has evolved, instructional communication research has increasingly noted the clear link between student participation and increased learning outcomes (Frisby, Weber, & Beckner, 2014; Frymier & Houser, 2016; Rocca, 2010). As Blankenstein et al. (2011) highlighted, the mere act of verbally discussing course content leads to greater recall of the material.

However, a variety of factors have been found to impact the amount of student participation in the classroom. Rocca (2010) outlined various mitigating factors, several of which function as components of the IBM including logistics, instructor behaviors (teacher behaviors), classroom climate (classroom contextual issues), personality traits, and communication apprehension (student characteristics). Apprehension alone has been found to negatively influence the links between participation, engagement, and motivation (Frymier & Houser, 2016). Despite this, instructor behaviors, such as rapport and immediacy, can lessen the impact of apprehension on student participation (Frisby, Berger, et al., 2014; Goodboy & Myers, 2008). In this way, student participation functions as a variable affected by both student and instructor qualities and behaviors. Significant to the present study, however, is Sherblom et al.’s (2013) determination that in addition to these influences, instructional modality can impact student behavior whereby a student’s knowledge of the medium of instruction determines their likelihood of participation. Additionally, others have noted that modality impacts participation as students are afforded more control (Ahlin, 2021). Since F2F classes were often the norm in higher education prior to COVID-19, students may feel more comfortable participating within this context. Yet, as online and blended instruction becomes more normalized (Brophy et al., 2021), it becomes increasingly important that we investigate whether participation is impacted by modality, a classroom contextual issue undergirded by IBM or if other first-order variables account for these differences.

Rapport

Rapport is frequently defined as a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond between two or more people (Catt et al., 2007; Faranda & Clarke, 2004; Frisby & Martin, 2010). The concept of rapport has often been examined in conjunction with classroom studies, student–teacher interactions, and student–student interactions. Sidelinger et al. (2015) found that perceived rapport between students and their instructor in the public speaking classroom have significant positive implications for students enrolled in the foundational course. This is because teachers and students often form a distinctively interpersonal bond, with students delivering speeches on topics that are personally relevant. Due to this bond, a positive sense of rapport can positively impact the interpersonal relationships within the classroom. In previous studies, students have self-reported that rapport is a vital characteristic for an effective instructor (Catt et al., 2007; Faranda & Clarke, 2004). Further, building rapport in the classroom has been linked to greater participation and less participation anxiety (Frisby, Berger, et al., 2014), important in performance-based classrooms.
Student–student rapport simultaneously influences the classroom learning environment. In their study on online classes, Kaufmann and Vallade (2020) found that student–student rapport and connectedness are more likely to reduce feelings of loneliness than interactions with the instructor. Additionally, Frisby and Martin (2010) found that both instructor–student and student–student rapport were positively associated with student participation and perception of a connected classroom.

While extant literature confirms the importance of promoting rapport in the classroom, some gaps in the current research still exist. For example, Frisby and Martin (2010) noted that some students are more prone to perceive rapport with their instructors than others: “students who are motivated to communicate with instructors for relational reasons are likely to build, and subsequently perceive more positive rapport with their instructors” (p. 159). This research indicates a potential relationship between student variables, such as motivation, communication apprehension, interest, or mindset, that serve to mitigate the impact of rapport. Further, much previous research has focused on rapport established directly within the traditional F2F classroom. While scholars have begun to explore rapport through online modalities (Frisby et al., 2013; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020), additional research should focus on the impacts of rapport in more online, blended, and hybrid classes. This becomes even more complicated considering the ever-changing norms for teacher–student interactions as well as classroom format created by the ongoing pandemic. Online classes, physical distancing, face coverings/limited nonverbals, and so forth, may all impact the ways students perceive rapport.

Summary

The onset of COVID-19 has produced major implications for higher ed teaching and learning (Schwartzman, 2020). As is evidenced through our discussions of each variable, from interest to rapport, their corresponding relationships may be complicated by dimensions of modality as well as the lasting impacts of COVID-19 on both students and collegiate instruction, challenging our previous assumptions. While pre-pandemic research found few differences among instructional modalities (Broeckelman-Post & Pyle, 2017; Broeckelman-Post et al., 2019; Broeckelman-Post et al., 2020; Nortvig et al., 2018), we argue that the changing landscape of higher education, additional strains on college students, and new complexities in instructional delivery requires renewed study. As instructors redefine education based on what we learned during the pandemic, research must continue to examine these decisions to ensure our students receive the best chance for positive outcomes. These outcomes start first with understanding how our students enter educational settings and student engagement variables. Our focus on modality already positions our study in alignment with one of the first-order variables within the IBM, classroom contextual issues. Recognizing that recent research has established the changing circumstances of college students and the impact of communication mindset, we also examine the first-order variable: student characteristics, specifically communication mindset as it can shape student instructional beliefs. Considering previous work has tested the fit of the IBM using two of the three variables (Frisby, Weber, & Beckner, 2014), our attention toward modality, mindset, and student engagement variables may allow us to expand our understanding of the applicability of the IBM in the shifting context of higher education. To investigate these concepts, we ask the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Does student engagement in the foundational communication course—as measured by reported student interest (cognitive and emotional dimensions), participation, and rapport—differ according to course modality (i.e., F2F versus hybrid)?
**RQ2:** Is student engagement in the foundational communication course—as measured by reported student interest (cognitive and emotional dimensions), participation, and rapport—predicted by students’ communication growth mindset at the start of the course term?

**Methods**

**Participants and Procedure**
Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in the Introduction to Public Speaking course (F2F or hybrid delivery) at a midsized public university in the Midwestern United States. To recruit subjects, the first author visited and announced the study purpose during in-person large lecture sections of the F2F class. For the hybrid section of the course, recruitment scripts and the study purpose were shared via Canvas, the institution’s learning management system, and instructors played a video of the recruitment announcement in their lab breakout sections. After reading or providing the recruitment scripts, IRB-approved FERPA consent forms were distributed for voluntary participation to students. Students were awarded nominal extra credit for their participation, one of the many opportunities for extra credit available in the course.

Participants completed data for this study at three time points during the academic term. Communication mindset was measured as part of a standard slate of pre-term assessments, conducted during the first 2 weeks of the academic semester. Only students who completed and submitted the study consent form had their data included in this study.

To study the students’ engagement in the public speaking course, participants completed surveys during approximately Week 5 and approximately Week 10 of the 16-week academic semester. These measures included Student Interest, Class Participation, and the Modified Rapport measure, along with other measures as part of a larger project. There were no significant differences between participants’ scores in these latter two waves of data collection, therefore scores were averaged to create composite dependent variables.

An initial panel of \( N = 425 \) students consented to share their pre-term data for the study and completed the Week 5 wave of data collection. Two-hundred eighty-six participants were retained between Week 5 and Week 10 data collection waves (32.7% attrition rate). An additional 35 responses were omitted from main analyses due to incomplete data, resulting in a final sample of \( N = 251 \).

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 years old (\( M = 18.78, \ SD = 1.30 \)). Of those who indicated their sex, 173 reported female (68.9%), 72 reported male (28.7%), 2 reported nonbinary, and 1 reported transgender. For ethnicity, participants could enter multiple options, and 80.1% (\( N = 201 \)) reported being White, 4.0% (\( N = 10 \)) Black or African American, 4.0% (\( N = 10 \)) Hispanic or Latino/a, 4.4% (\( N = 11 \)) Asian or Asian American, 4.4% (\( N = 11 \)) biracial or mixed race, less than 1% (\( N = 1 \)) Native American or Indigenous, and 2.0% (\( N = 5 \)) reported as other. Sixty-one participants identified as first-generation college students (24.3%). Students reported class standings as First-year students (\( N = 176 \)), Sophomores (\( N = 46 \)), Juniors (\( N = 22 \)), and Seniors (\( N = 4 \)). Additionally, 77 participants held jobs while in school (30.7%), and 21 students were involved in care labor (e.g., childcare, parental care work, etc.; 8.4%).
Measures

Communication Mindset

Communication mindset was measured using Nordin and Broeckelman-Post’s (2019) Communication Mindset scale, a modified version of Dweck’s (2000) Implicit Theories of Intelligence scale. The instrument contains eight items (e.g., “No matter how strong your communication skills are, you can always change them quite a bit”) measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of a growth mindset. This scale previously demonstrated strong reliability, with alpha coefficients equaling .91 (Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2019). In this study, the communication mindset measure (M = 3.82, SD = 0.68) exhibited a Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient of 0.92.

Student Interest (Cognitive and Emotional)

Student interest was measured using Mazer’s (2012) Student Interest scale, which contains 16 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Seven items assess participants’ cognitive interest, or whether participants could understand and recall course material (e.g., “the information covered in the course is making me more knowledgeable”). Nine items pertained to participants’ emotional interest, or whether students were engaged by course content (e.g., “The topics covered in this course fascinate me”). Prior reliability estimates indicated alpha coefficients of .97 for emotional interest and .91 for cognitive interest (Mazer, 2012). In this study, we found Cronbach’s alpha of .85 for the cognitive interest dimension (M = 3.97, SD = 0.46) and .92 for the emotional interest dimension (M = 3.12, SD = 0.65).

Classroom Participation

A modified version of Fassinger’s (1995) Classroom Participation scale was used to measure students’ self-reported class participation. Five items (e.g., “I contribute to the class discussion”; “I ask questions in class”) were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never; 5 = Often/Always). The original measurement has previously displayed strong reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.84 (Fassinger, 1995). In this study, class participation (M = 2.59, SD = 0.92) obtained Cronbach’s alpha of .90.

Modified Rapport

Frisby and Martin’s (2010) Modified Rapport measure contains 11 items (e.g., “I strongly care about my instructor(s)/classmates”; “I have a close relationship with my instructor(s)/classmates”) measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). Frisby and Martin established reliability for the modified measure with a Cronbach’s alpha of .94. Modified Rapport (M = 3.50, SD = 0.64) demonstrated a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of .92 in this study.

Results

Research Question 1 asked whether student engagement in the communication foundational course would differ by course modality, and Research Question 2 asked whether student engagement could be predicted by students’ communication growth mindset at the start of the course term. Research Questions 1 and 2 were examined via a series of Analyses of Covariance (ANCOVA), models, each with course modality (i.e., F2F, Hybrid) as a fixed factor, communication growth mindset as a continuous predictor, and four student engagement variables (i.e., student interest–cognitive, student interest–emotional,
participation, and rapport) as dependent variables in the respective models. Table 1 includes the summary of significant and nonsignificant effects for all models.

### TABLE 1
Effects of Course Modality and Communication Mindset on Student Engagement (N = 244)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Course Modality</th>
<th>Communication Growth Mindset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F2F</td>
<td>Hybrid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Interest</td>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class Rapport</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01

In response to RQ1, course modality exerted a statistically significant effect on only one student engagement dimension: the cognitive dimension of student engagement. No statistically significant differences across course modality conditions for student interest–emotional, participation, or rapport.

In response to RQ2, communication growth mindset associated positively with each of the four students’ engagement variables. Greater endorsement of communication growth mindset early in the academic term predicted higher scores on both emotional and cognitive dimensions of student interest, reported student participation, and perceptions of class rapport.

**Discussion**

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdown, as educators and students return to our classrooms, communication instructors have the opportunity and obligation to assess instructional design adaptations implemented during the rapid shift online, so that we might mindfully and intentionally renew our teaching approach to the foundational communication course. Among these changes was experimenting with diverse modalities for our classroom. Grounded in the Instructional Beliefs Model (IBM; Weber et al., 2011), which asserts that teacher behaviors, classroom context, and student characteristics operate in concert to produce student outcomes via students’ instructional beliefs; this study had dual objectives. The first was to examine the impact of a classroom context variable (i.e., course delivery modality) on students’ interest, participation, and evaluations of classroom rapport. The second objective was to examine how communication mindset, as a student characteristic, shapes these same student engagement outcomes.

In response to our first research question, we found only one statistically significant effect of course modality on student engagement, within the domain of student cognitive interest. We found no significant differences in student scores on their self-reports of student interest–emotional, participation, or class rapport. In the largest part, this analysis supports Broeckelman-Post and Pyle’s (2017) findings that public speaking courses delivered across a variety of modalities confer relatively equal benefits in terms of classroom climate, a measure of students’ comfort in the classroom linked with engagement (Wei et al., 2019). It also echoes Nortvig et al.’s (2018) finding of little difference in classroom outcomes between
F2F instruction and hybrid/blended learning environments, bearing similarities in self-report measures in more recent work (Broeckelman-Post et al., 2020).

The one effect exerted by modality in our study was a difference in cognitive student interest, which was higher in the hybrid sections of the course than in the F2F section. One explanation for this finding derives from the fact that the cognitive dimension of student interest pertains to students’ ability to remember and assimilate course material. It may be that the students in the hybrid sections felt more secure in their retention because they had access to the course videos and could return to the lecture portion as needed. These findings echo the work of Ahlin (2021) who noted that hybrid delivery allows for more student-led learning with self-paced participation accommodating individual needs.

Overall, the findings for RQ1 provide some reassurance for those instructors unexpectedly utilizing a more technologically mediated modality that student emotional interest, participation, and perceptions of rapport were likely not impacted by these changes as students can still retain some interaction with faculty members. However, this finding should be acknowledged with the caveat that larger withdrawal rate from online sections may selectively remove those students who performed poorly in this format (Broeckelman-Post et al., 2019). Additionally, these results should also be considered in light of Goke et al. (2021) who noted that students’ opinions about modality might shape their responses, as students in this study had the option to select into their format of the course when they registered.

Turning to the second research question, we observed that adopting a communication growth mindset positively predicted student interest (emotional and cognitive), participation, and rapport in the public speaking classroom. It makes logical sense that a student who expects they can improve their communication competence would exhibit more participation and interest in the content in order to realize gains. Students may also be more receptive to rapport- or relationship-building among instructors and students to the extent they feel agentic in improving their skills. This finding both further supports Mahoney’s (2009) research which noted that mindset has a bearing on student perceptions of and performance within an online course and extends his findings by specifically testing communication mindset and by looking at modalities beyond the fully online classroom. Our data also align with Nordin and Broeckelman-Post’s (2019) research finding that mindset is associated with increased student engagement—with the added benefit that our measure of mindset was collected in a pre-term assessment (first 2 weeks of class), instead of a post-term assessment as was done in prior work, providing initial evidence of causation among these variable relationships.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study is helpful in moving instructional communication theory and research forward. As we explored the classroom contextual issue of modality in concert with the student characteristic of mindset, it appears that at times some of these predictor variables have more impact than others, as mindset accounted for differences in students’ interactions in and perceptions of the classroom. Though this study by necessity explores just a few of the components of the model (like Frisby, Weber, & Beckner, 2014), we argue that this provides continued warrant for utilizing the IBM in the future. In particular, we see value in theorizing interconnections among the course, teacher, and student elements of the IBM. To start, we believe that certain student characteristics (communication mindset among them) may be productively modeled as both exogenous and endogenous variables. Communication mindset is a stable trait, but potentially mutable by strategic classroom intervention (Nordin & Broeckelman-Post, 2020). Students may be convinced, for example, by particular teaching practices, to adopt a growth mindset...
with regard to their communication skill. In such case, the IBM could be re-articulated as recursive, allowing for fluidity in student characteristics in response to teacher behaviors (such as communication mindset priming), and course contextual variables (such as the availability of stable course assets like recorded lectures).

This study also provides support for more nuanced parsing of engagement variables in studying the effects of modality and mindset on student learning. Our findings support Nordin and Broeckelman-Post’s (2019) mindset measure as a useful tool in understanding how students enter our classrooms in research and instructional assessment—this project extends their work by also connecting mindset to interest, participation, and rapport, and making room for discussions of causality. Because we observed an effect of modality on just *one* aspect of engagement (i.e., cognitive student interest), we recommend disaggregating the engagement construct into subdimensions or types of engagement.

Additionally, this project confers implications for instructional communication practices for instructors and course directors alike. First, the significant impact of modality on student cognitive interest suggests that student learning might benefit if students have the ability to view course content “on demand” as opposed to during a single, time delimited lecture meeting. We recommend applying this insight in hybrid courses and beyond. Instructors, even in F2F classes, should work to add more course content to their course management systems, be it classroom lecture recordings, student notetakers, or making slides available. Having the opportunity to return to content helps raise student cognitive interest which is linked to positive student outcomes (Frisby, Weber, & Beckner, 2014) and aligns with best practices for universal and accessible design. Course administrators could look further into the possibility of a hybrid modality as a benefit for accessibility as this is not having negative implications on key markers of student engagement and we also see an increase in cognitive student interest, which could be linked to the accessibility of material or the ability to return quickly to specific lecture content. Second, this research supports the need for course administrators and instructors alike to address issues of communication mindset in the course early on by including assessment measures of communication mindset into course preterm assessment. Knowing this information would allow faculty to add more strategic language to their syllabus, speech evaluations, and course content that cultivates a growth-based mindset, and the adaptations to be evaluated for effectiveness. Third, Williams (2020) noted a growth in faculty motivation after learning about mindset; therefore, course directors and department chairs should include more professional development opportunities on mindset at the start of the academic term. Finally, though Nordin and Broeckelman-Post (2020) noted the public speaking course did not inherently function as an intervention for mindset, with strategic planning, intervention techniques could be implemented. Instructors might explore such techniques such as strategically developing micro messages in communication (Kyte et al., 2020), instilling relational goals, increased classroom interactions, mentoring by senior students, and properly tailored praise messages (Williams, 2020).

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Certain methodological choices contextualize the interpretation of these findings. First, data for this project were collected during the first academic term in which classes returned to “normal” at the institution under study. Having the opportunity to be fully back on campus might have increased students’ positive perceptions of the classroom. Another limitation was that a portion of participants (32.7%) only completed the first wave of data collection. This could have been a result of burnout, disinterest, or might overlap with those who Broeckelman-Post et al. (2019) found dropping online classes, thus causing us to miss the experiences of students who might be at elevated risk of not completing.
Study limitations, coupled with our renewed understanding of the ways that student interests are impacted by modality and mindset, offer multiple possibilities for future research. Researchers should continue to evaluate the modality shifts that are happening in our post-COVID-19 classrooms to see how the changes might further impact student perceptions of their learning, actual classroom outcomes, and evaluations of their instructors. Finally, after developing assessments for future mindset interventions, researchers should continue to test the effectiveness of these interventions and the links between mindset and other variables like resilience (Frisby & Vallade, 2021).

**Conclusion**

Considering the number of classroom adjustments COVID-19 has created, now is a time for renewed examination of course design in our programs. Previous research has established the functionality of online and hybrid classroom formats, but with the shifting nature of both the college classroom and our campus communities, examining the accompanying changes is a priority. This project confirms that course modality does not have a significant impact on students’ participation, interest, or perceptions of rapport in the foundational communication course classroom. However, student communication mindset has significant implications for student engagement outcomes. Instructors and course directors must continue to develop interventions for communication mindset to foster student engagement so that students can succeed in the classroom regardless of the method of course delivery.

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Instructional Resources to Assess Applied Projects as a Culminating Graduate Communication Student Experience

Michael G. Strawser, Bridget Rubenking, Kelsey Lunsford, and Margaret Gravelyn

Keywords: communication, communication graduate programs, assessment, applied projects, rubric

Abstract: This study reviews the traditional culminating graduate student experiences, theses, and comprehensive exams, as well as a newer, more professionally relevant option, applied research projects. We conceptualize applied projects as student-led, client-connected, hands-on, experiential projects that address a real-world communication problem or topic through the creation of relevant deliverables. We used Glassick et al.'s (1997) scholarship assessed model and the National Communication Association's communication learning outcomes to determine perceived differences between culminating experiences. Survey results (N = 32) of recent alumni and current master's level Communication students demonstrate near-equal ratings of applied projects and theses in their ability to both meet scholarship assessment criteria and communication learning outcomes. Comprehensive exams are rated comparatively worse. Based on these criteria and others gained from implementing applied projects as an option for students, we offer a rubric for assessing master’s level applied research projects.
Introduction

In what has become a memoir for missed opportunities, Cassuto (2015), author of *The Graduate School Mess*, laments the state of graduate education. For Cassuto (2015), the “graduate school mess,” as he calls it, is hamstrung by an assumption that we (academicians) are responsible for preparing graduate students to be future professors. This outdated notion is worrisome for numerous reasons but chief among them is the realization that we may be preparing graduate students for a future that either does not exist or that they do not want. As a result, preparation for professorial positions that center on scholarly research may just be an obsolete core focus of graduate education. But, if the academy is not preparing most graduate students for the professoriate, what then?

The central challenge of graduate school has been communicated for some time. Even in 1944, Edwards and Jessup declared the system effectively broken. In the decades since, employers continue to communicate a disconnect between their expectations and the skill set of graduates (Supiano, 2018). The supposed preparation gap that exists for college graduates entering the full-time workforce is not limited to undergraduate students. In some ways, the issues are magnified for doctorate students who, after deciding not to pursue a career in academia enter a world full of industry-friendly candidates (Nerad, 2004), but master’s students also face similar struggles. Master’s students deal with an already/not yet dilemma and training in their respective programs may veer more toward doctoral preparation rather than preparation for a specific industry (Austin, 2002).

Graduate students, at both the master’s and doctoral level, tend to have a traditional path: coursework followed by a culminating research paper and/or comprehensive exams. However, the traditional research paper, while helpful for those entering the academy full-time, may not be as applicable for graduate students who want to use their skills in a professional or industry context, especially depending on how the program or department approaches the thesis. Ironically, in the United States, approximately 13% of the population attains a master’s degree, and just one quarter of them go on to complete a PhD (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

The most recently available data on where recent PhDs are employed reveal a first: Private sector appointments now account for 42% of employers, while educational institution appointments account for 43% of employers for recent PhD graduates. A 43% placement rate of PhDs in academic positions is at its lowest in recent years, although much discrepancy across disciplines exists (Langin, 2019). There is hope, however, as there is a renewed call for alternative-academic (alt-academic) jobs which in turn has led graduate faculty to consider how to support all students regardless of differing career aspirations (Rogers, 2020). To keep pace with employment trends and prepare students who will not engage in traditional academic scholarship after graduation, and to prepare students for a variety of career possibilities, a more relevant model is needed.

It may be helpful, as a first step, to examine and acknowledge that a change has taken place. For Cassuto (2015), the misappropriated central assumption, that we are responsible to prepare future professors in graduate school, can be countered by two student-centered revisions to the graduate student experience: (1) that graduate programs need to revise curricula to effectively prepare students for employment beyond solely academia and (2) that students need to receive this preparation in a reasonable time frame.

Various developments have reinvigorated the industry preparation conversation, especially at the graduate level. For instance, many graduate programs have established connections with career services,
credentials or micro-credentials are part of curricula revisions, and internships, at some universities, are offered to master’s students for credit, as part of their graduate degree. These improvements should not be taken lightly. However, further discussion must occur surrounding culminating experiences at the graduate level.

We recognize that simultaneously training students for industry and the academy can be difficult. It is important to remember that our job as communication educators is to “design, execute, and interpret scholarly research on communication in a way that will transform” and this means students should come at communication topics as “scholars” (Thorson, 2005, p. 21). This point is important to remember. We cannot prepare every individual for a specific position, but our efforts in graduate programs especially should combine practice and theory/research.

As mentioned above, graduate school systemic challenges are substantial and developing career-ready master’s graduates is a multifaceted process. For our purposes, we are suggesting an assignment pathway that complements traditional culminating experiences (i.e., thesis and comprehensive exams). The path suggested here, a culminating applied project, uses a traditional high-impact practice framework and revitalizes an applied definition of scholarship to help prepare students for a range of career opportunities. To frame the remainder of our argument, we conceptualize an applied project as a student-led, client-connected, hands-on, experiential project that addresses a real-world communication problem or topic through the creation of relevant deliverables. While theses and comprehensive exams may be employed for more applied goals, depending on the student and the program, there are typically qualities inherent to exams and theses that make them more rigid than the applied projects concepts, as implemented at our university. For instance, a thesis must be a five-chapter academic product, despite any additional creativity or additional content. Final deliverables for applied projects can vary more, as client needs drive the final products. Examples from our own department include: A training video on suicide awareness, now mandated viewing for new firefighters in the county, and a rebranding of our university sexual assault support department.

We use our data to create program-specific instructional resources that we believe may be applicable and usable for other institutions. Our rubric (Appendix A) incorporates categorizations from the National Communication Association communication learning outcomes as well as ideas from Glassick et al. (1997) regarding assessment of applied scholarship. Based on previous research, our standardized applied project rubric focuses on clarity of communication goals; the application of communication theory; messaging; methodology; influence and identification; the accomplishment of communication goals; ethical communication; deliverables that add to the field; and reflective critique. In addition, we have developed learning objectives (Appendix B) instructors can apply to applied projects at the graduate level. We suggest that communication programs can use these specific learning objectives to refine their systemic approach to programmatic assessment. First, however, we provide a rationale for applied projects as a high-impact practice that can achieve authentic assessment of graduate communication students.

**Framing a New Expectation**

High-impact practices, as a framework commonly used in undergraduate degree programs, may be a worthwhile companion for graduate programs. High-impact practices have rapidly become institutional imperatives for higher education course and program assessment. Even more so, as Kuh (2008) argues, high-impact practices, known as HIPs, can increase student engagement and student retention and, with
appropriate planning, student learning. Unfortunately, HIPs have long been a staple of undergraduate education whereas graduate education, and the subsequent assessment of graduate students and programs, has a more rigid, traditionally academic structure or pathway. High-impact practices have shown to be extremely effective. Kuh believes the effectiveness occurs because of six reasons: the considerable time and effort devoted to the task; the necessity of interacting with faculty and peers about substantive matters over an extended period; the likelihood that students will experience diversity through contact with others; frequent feedback; the contextualized nature of the activities; and the life-changing or transformational element.

High-impact practices should not be limited to undergraduate students. What is transformative during one's associate's or bachelor's degree can, theoretically, be transformative at the graduate level. Graduate students can benefit from high-impact practices specifically in terms of student engagement (Diggs, 2021) and retention (Sobeck et al., 2021). However, to continue to approach high-impact experiences at the graduate level additional dialogue is required, specifically one that encourages assessing transformative experiences and scholarship and further argues for the integration of applied projects at the graduate level.

**Applied Projects as Culminating Graduate Student Experiences**

Culminating experiences often take the form of a capstone project or class. At the undergraduate level, these culminating experiences happen, traditionally, during the student's senior year (Martin & Strawser, 2019). A capstone culminating experience requires students to apply what they have learned throughout the totality of their academic program. As such, a capstone may take the form of a research paper, a performance, portfolio or e-portfolio, or an exhibit of creative work (Thomas et al., 2014). These culminating capstone experiences showcase a holistic deliverable that brings together the student's training across their program and is not siloed to learning objectives represented in one course. A culminating capstone experience may be the most applicable model graduate education can use to effectively assess students beyond the traditional research paper.

Capstone culminating experiences, at the undergraduate level, are unique learning experiences. For one, capstones allow for holistic assessment where students demonstrate achievement of course or even program-level outcomes (Krause et al., 2014). Cullen (2016) sees a capstone as a final stage of a student’s education that offers closure and focus and should improve the employability of the student. For some programs, the capstone is dual-purpose, where students can demonstrate, or build, a direct workforce competency that suits their own need and needs of the employer (Thomas et al., 2014).

The capstone experience is not one-size-fits-all as there are several different models. Lee (2015) identifies six different interdisciplinary capstone models: externally oriented projects, academic inquiry projects, practice-oriented simulations, practice-based consultancies, task-oriented simulation, and professional placements. In terms of output, Cullen (2016) emphasizes varying outcomes that students should exemplify as part of their capstone experience, chief among them disciplinary and professional skills. And, more specifically, “transition to professional practice, integration and extension of prior learning, authentic and contextualized experiences, student ownership and independence, and continued development of critical inquiry and creativity” (Cullen, 2016, p. 368). In communication, capstone experiences can function as a synthesizing and integrative course. But, no matter how they manifest, demonstration of key concepts and skills as well as the development of integrated projects and an integration of the communication discipline are crucial (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2006).
Students’ satisfaction with their culminating experiences may be affected by multiple variables. As previously mentioned, it is important to offer graduate students an option that will allow for a better transition to a role outside of academia. At the undergraduate level, a variety of disciplines offer capstones that take a hands-on approach to preparing students for professional work settings. For example, Joo et al. (2019) discussed the rise of student satisfaction when engineering students were given projects that mirror potential work in their field. Similarly, hotel and tourism management undergraduates experienced greater levels of satisfaction when simulations were used as a learning tool in their capstone course (Pratt & Hahn, 2015). Therefore, if a graduate student intends on seeking or continuing a professional role outside of higher education, perhaps they would be more satisfied completing a project that prepares them for their specific goals such as an applied project. Alternatively, a student seeking to pursue a career in higher education may find a thesis more relevant.

In addition to seeking an educational experience that is relevant, other factors may influence a student’s satisfaction with the culminating experience that they choose. Padilla (2016) found that the support system of a student completing a culminating experience played a significant role in the successful completion of participants’ capstones. Padilla’s conceptualization of how work factored into a student’s support system focused on work flexibility; however, colleagues and mentors could offer more direct support if completing an applied project related to a student’s current employment. Also, Padilla’s respondents noted a concern with another group part of their support system, faculty availability. While beyond the scope of this discussion, resources like the one developed here may help faculty—who are overtaxed and overworked—guide a student through the applied project process while providing a baseline for assessment. We recognize that training faculty to work with students in a truly applied setting may need additional discussion but for purposes here it is important to note that applied experiences are helpful tools to use to help students achieve varying career goals and, as such, cannot be ignored.

Assessing Student Learning Through Culminating Projects

Student knowledge is evaluated differently when comparing comprehensive exams and theses. Completing a thesis will measure students’ ability to recall what they previously learned to complete independent research (Ashwin et al., 2016). Thesis completion measures a student’s ability to successfully argue their research, as well as respond to questions in defense of their study (Mauch & Park, 2003). A thesis can evaluate student knowledge by measuring how well a student argues their point, using information learned through coursework, to further existing literature.

Comprehensive exams help measure knowledge retention from students and ensure that students are up to par with understanding graduate coursework in their discipline. Comprehensive exams also help departments by using the competence (or lack thereof) from students and their results on the exam to find areas of improvement for the curriculum within the discipline (Lindquist et al., 2011). Though comprehensive exams have long been used to measure student knowledge after completion of coursework, the effectiveness of comprehensive exams to accurately measure student knowledge and abilities is often challenged as students possess vastly different learning and problem-solving strategies (Morris, 1982).

Our program incorporates an applied project model and students can select an applied project option instead of a thesis or comprehensive exam option. How effective a culminating experience is for a student depends on the student’s goals. When researching online courses, Barbera et al. (2013) found that the learning content of a course positively correlated with the perceived ability to apply the knowledge
gained to new contexts. As noted previously, theses tend to be most helpful for students hoping to pursue a doctoral degree. Students seeking employment outside of higher education can gain transferable skills by completing an applied project that more closely aligns with their career goals. For students who choose the comprehensive exam route, the applicability of the experience to their career goals may be less direct as the final product does not result in a portfolio-building deliverable in the way that a thesis or an applied project would. In addition to transferability, Barbera et al. noted that the learning content positively correlated with participants’ satisfaction with online learning experiences. Therefore, students might be more satisfied with their culminating experience if they choose the option that is most practical for their professional development.

Because of varying differences, for our purposes we do not fully position a capstone alone as a functional culminating project. However, there are issues with assuming an applied project is directly akin to a capstone culminating experience. For one, as Wien (2010) points out, in some capstone courses, an applied project may just be one assignment and not the overall focus of the class. Thorson (2005) also describes applied projects as an experience where students spend “three-quarters of their capstone semester producing professional products like news photo documentaries, investigate news analyses, best books on topics like crime or education, and the like” (p. 17). She goes on to say that the “quarter-time research component was ratcheted up to a respectable small piece of quality research” (Thorson, 2005, p. 17). Potentially this is a semantic matter, but if an applied project is an assumed “part of” the capstone course at the undergraduate level, how should we expect graduate students to take an applied project seriously as the culminating effort?

In addition, capstone courses tend to be summative experiences. Scholars have wondered, though, whether capstone events should be more forward-looking and function as a bridge between the degree and the world after college (Heinemann, 1997; Rosenberry & Vicker, 2006). Applied projects help establish clear dialogue between colleges and companies, something desperately needed today (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019). In this manner, an applied project can become a potential pivotal core feature of graduate education. Applied projects, as one graduate culminating experience, can help students develop unique or industry-specific skills without using core curriculum to train students for just one company (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019).

The applied project can be a culminating experience, bringing together theory and research from the degree program; however, similar to the thesis, we believe an applied project should also seek to develop a new understanding, new skill, or bring to the forefront new research. Like Rosenberry and Vicker (2006), we believe applied projects should infuse integration, application, and transition. As such, we advocate for a standardized applied project experience, just like most graduate programs do for thesis submissions or comprehensive exams. To do this, assessment measures, best practices, and learning outcomes must be developed. Ultimately, applied projects should present an equitable culminating experience for graduate students in terms of program outcomes and rigor. Ultimately, standardized learning outcomes and expanded definitions of scholarship can frame applied project assessment.

**NCA Communication Learning Outcomes**

The National Communication Association (NCA, 2015) developed nine learning outcomes for students in communication courses, formally known as the organization’s Learning Outcomes in Communication (LOC). The outcomes took the discipline’s core values, potential career paths for
students, and feedback from those within the discipline into account when they were being outlined by faculty leaders within the organization. Essentially, the goal of the LOCs set forth by the NCA is to articulate what students in communication programs should know, understand, and do upon completion of the degree. The nine LOCs are as follows: (1) describe the communication discipline and its central questions; (2) employ communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts; (3) engage in communication inquiry; (4) create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context; (5) critically analyze messages; (6) demonstrate the ability to accomplish communicative goals (self-efficacy); (7) apply ethical communication principles and practices; (8) utilize communication to embrace difference; (9) influence public discourse (The National Communication Association, 2015).

This list details goals at length and can prepare students for success for employment in the workforce or a career in academia after completion of a communication program. These nine outcomes can be used as a guideline for scholars when engaging in dialogue on how to improve student learning for those enrolled in communication programs. Importantly, these learning outcomes can also be implemented in the use of applied projects for graduate students as a culminating experience. Because these LOCs are adaptable, student-centered, specific to the communication discipline, and encourage student-to-faculty collaboration, they can serve as an efficient guideline to assess applied projects.

Assessing a New Expectation

We recognize that, because of their variance, it may be difficult to assess applied projects (Scott & Van der Merwe, 2003). However, Glassick et al. (1997) provide a simultaneously appropriate framework to evaluate culminating applied projects. In their work, Scholarship Assessed, Glassick et al. propose a model that evaluates the new standards and ever-evolving role of the professoriate. Yet, their work provides insight into assessing student scholarly work that transcends the traditional research paper. The six dimensions and clarifying questions for assessing scholarship proposed by Glassick et al. (1997) include:

1. Clarity of goals
   A. Does the scholar state the basic premise of the scholarly work?
   B. Does the scholar define objectives that are realistic and achievable?
   C. Does the scholar identify important questions in the field?
2. Adequacy of preparation
   A. Does the scholar show an understanding of existing scholarship in the field?
   B. Does the scholar bring the necessary skills to his or her work?
   C. Does the scholar bring together the resources necessary to move the project forward?
3. Appropriateness of methods
   A. Does the scholar use methods appropriate to the goals?
   B. Does the scholar effectively apply the methods selected?
   C. Does the scholar modify procedures in response to changing circumstances?
4. Significance of results
   A. Does the scholar achieve the goals?
   B. Does the scholar’s work add consequentially to the field?
   C. Does the scholar’s work open additional areas for further exploration?
5. Effectiveness of presentation
   A. Does the scholar use a suitable style and effective organization to present his or her work?
   B. Does the scholar use appropriate forums for communicating work to its intended audiences?
   C. Does the scholar present his or her message with clarity and integrity?
6. Reflective critique
   A. Does the scholar critically evaluate his or her own work?
   B. Does the scholar bring an appropriate breadth of evidence to his or her critique?
   C. Does the scholar use evaluation to improve the quality of future work?

For our purposes, these six dimensions can help graduate faculty and graduate program directors think strategically about requirements for and assessment of applied projects at the graduate level. Glassick et al. (1997) believe these six categories are helpful for assessing discovery, integration, application, and teaching in the academy. However, like the professoriate, we recognize that our students have different goals, outlets, desires, and skills. To create an equitable landscape, how can master’s programs create a framework to assess diverse types of scholarly work developed by students in an applied academic context?

The previously described NCA learning outcomes and the six dimensions for assessing scholarship help establish a common language to assess applied scholarly deliverables or culminating projects at the graduate level. Like Glassick et al. (1997), we believe projects should have established goals where the student-scholar is clear about the aims of their work, that deliverables should be adequately and professionally prepared, and that methods should be chosen wisely and applied effectively. We also agree that projects should have significant results or make significant contributions to the field, that student-scholars should present their findings effectively, and that the student-scholar should think deeply about their work while seeking the opinions of others and reflecting on their learning through the process. By developing best practices, learning outcomes, rubrics, and expectations that emphasize the benefits of high-impact practices and encourage a new way to assess scholarship, professors can help create worthwhile culminating experiences even at the graduate level that transcend thesis submissions or comprehensive exams.

Thankfully, the review of deliverables, like applied projects, has experienced a renaissance of sorts as authentic assignments have become more popular at colleges and universities. Authentic assignments generally measure outcomes that are worthwhile, significant, and meaningful. Furthermore, authentic assignments require application of what students have learned to a new situation and demands judgment to determine what information and skills are relevant and how they should be used. Very specifically, authentic assignments replicate real-world performances and involve performance measures with the end goal of developing applicable skills. As a rule of thumb, assignments are authentic when there is a meaningful connection between the grade and project participation (Frey et al., 2012). By approaching applied projects as authentic assignments, we can determine a way forward to assess applied projects in a way that is helpful and effective.

**Assessing Applied Projects: A Path Forward**

Applied projects that are rigorous, summative, as well as forward-looking may solve some of the issues inherent in graduate school and may provide an authentic culminating experience. Among the solutions, students can build out their portfolio, establish specific “industry” skills while tying these skills to theory, and network with corporate partners. Purposeful applied projects can also help establish
partnerships between institutions and companies and create a shared language or shared understanding (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019). Furthermore, applied projects should “develop the research effort and link it to a tremendous applied enterprise” (Thorson, 2005, p. 17).

To develop learning objectives and clear and consistent guidelines, we undertook a survey research project with the goal of using the data to design relevant instructional materials—specifically, learning objectives for applied projects as well as a rubric for assessing master’s level applied research projects in communication. Therefore, this project surveys current Communication Master’s level students and recent alums who have a context for applied projects at our institution. Because of this limited scope, our number of participants was lower. While there are several relevant stakeholder groups, such as faculty and employers, student perceptions ultimately are what determine actual choices made by students, as well as actual experiences from the student perspective. To develop student-centered assessments, gaining their insight about the value of such assessments is a crucial step. The primary goal of this research project is to define applied project learning objectives based on previously collected and new data and create a rubric for applied research projects.

A primary distinction that must be made then, is how applied research projects differ from similar projects. We are primarily interested in how applied projects differ in expected learning objectives and proposed assessment criteria as compared to the traditional master’s thesis. In addition, a third, common culminating experience at the graduate level in communication is explored: comprehensive exams. Previously conceptualized as the non-PhD track option for master’s students, comprehensive exams cannot be characterized as a high-impact practice, and thus do not offer the established benefits of more engaging, student-centered learning that HIPs can provide. Given the established differences between high-impact and non-high-impact learning experiences, and our interest in discovering differentiating features of an applied project as compared to a traditional master’s thesis, we explore three research questions. First, we are interested in student and alumni perspectives on the effectiveness of these high-impact culminating experience (i.e., theses and projects) as well as comprehensive exams in preparing students for their next steps—either in the workforce or in pursuit of a PhD:

**RQ1:** How are culminating experiences viewed in regard to preparing graduates for the workplace (RQ1a) and for further academic study (RQ1b)?

Second, we are interested in how these same stakeholders view the value of these culminating experiences in meeting basic assessment criteria related to both academic scholarship and specifically competence in the communication discipline. Since comprehensive exams do not rise to the level of academic scholarship, they are excluded from RQ2. Both the value of traditional and newly implemented culminating experiences are explored as adequate venues for demonstrating communication competency.

**RQ2:** Are applied projects or theses viewed as best for allowing students to demonstrate competence in scholarship, according to Glassick’s six scholarship assessment criteria?

**RQ3:** Which culminating experience option is viewed as best for allowing students to demonstrate competence in NCA’s nine Communication Learning Outcomes?
Methods

A survey study of current students and recent alumni with ties to one master's program in Communication at a university in the Southeast United States was undertaken to help answer the research questions posed. All procedures were completed with the approval of the university's Institutional Review Board. The survey took approximately 12 minutes, and was distributed via Qualtrics.

Participants

Participants in the current study (N = 32) were current students or recent graduates (within 3 years) of the same Master's program in Communication. Participants were contacted via email to ask to participate by the program's faculty coordinator, which provided a link to the informed consent document and survey. The associated Communication Master's program implemented an applied research project exit option 3 years prior to this data collection, which also served the internal purpose of refining expectations and guidelines for faculty and students. Participants were 75% female, 21.9% male, and 3.1% declined to indicate their sex, with a mean age of 28.11 (SD = 10.39). All participants were asked if they were Latino/Hispanic, and 9.4% indicated that they were. Participants were given the option of selecting a number of different races that best represent them: 18.8% of participants identified as Black, 75% identified as White, 3% identified as Asian/Asian American, and 12.5% identified as “Other.”

Measures

*Workplace and PhD Program Preparation.* Single-item, 5-point Likert scale items were used to assess how well individuals view each of the previously identified master's program culminating experience options (applied projects, theses, and comprehensive exams) to prepare graduates for “the workplace,” and for “further study in a PhD program.”

*Dimensions for Scholarship Assessment.* All participants were asked to evaluate how important Glassick et al.'s (1997) six dimensions of evaluating scholarship are to assessing applied research projects and when evaluating master's theses. These dimensions include Clarity of Goals, Adequacy of Preparation, Appropriateness of Methods, Significance of Results, Effectiveness of Presentation, and Reflective Critique. Since comprehensive exams are not considered academic scholarship, these questions were not asked about them. Short descriptions accompanied each dimension. These perceived importance ratings are collected on 5-point Likert scales.

*Communication Learning Outcomes.* Participants were also asked how each of the three master's level culminating experience options can help graduates demonstrate competence in NCA's Communication Learning Outcomes. These learning outcomes include items such as “Employ communication theories, perspectives, principles and concepts,” “Critically analyze messages,” and “Apply ethical communication principles and practices.” These are measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *Not at all* to *Very much.* All learning outcomes are presented in Table 1. The measures of Dimensions of Scholarship and Communication Learning Outcomes thus provide an indication of how well each culminating experience should demonstrate competency in each of these dimensions.
Table 1. Perceptions about each culminating experience option (projects, theses, exams) demonstrating proficiency in NCA’s nine communication learning outcomes.

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<td>Describe the discipline and central questions</td>
<td>3.84*</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employ theories, perspectives, principles, concepts</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>4.72*</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>.99</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engage in communication inquiry</td>
<td>4.25b</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>4.63b</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>3.50b</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create messages appropriate to audience, purpose, context</td>
<td>4.69b</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>4.03b</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>3.00b</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critically analyze messages</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>3.53*</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplish communicative goals</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>3.50*</td>
<td>1.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apply ethical communication principles and practices</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>3.53*</td>
<td>1.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utilize communication to embrace difference</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>3.16*</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence public discourse</td>
<td>4.19b</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>3.75b</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>2.69b</td>
<td>1.31</td>
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* = significantly differs from both other means; b = all significantly differ from one another.
Results

The first research question can be answered by examining responses from participants on how well each of the culminating experience options—thesis, applied project, and comprehensive exams—prepare students for both the workplace and for further study in a PhD program. SPSS version 26 was used to analyze all data. Paired-sample \( t \)-tests revealed that applied research projects \( (M = 4.36, SD = .73) \) were rated better at preparing students for the workplace than both theses \( (M = 3.71, SD = 1.01; t(27) = 3.204, p < .01) \) and comprehensive exams \( (M = 2.69, SD = 1.19; t(27) = 7.309, p < .001) \). Theses were also rated as significantly better than comprehensive exams, \( t(27) = 3.948, p < .001 \).

The same analysis was used to test perceptions about preparedness for further academic study. Theses \( (M = 4.86, SD = .36) \) were rated better than both applied research projects \( (M = 3.50, SD = 1.20; t(27) = 5.729, p < .001) \) and comprehensive exams \( (M = 2.68, SD = 1.25; t(27) = 8.636) \). Applied research projects were also rated significantly better than comprehensive exams, \( t(27) = 3.191, p < .010 \). In sum, applied research projects were viewed as the most effective in preparing students for the workplace, followed by theses and then comprehensive exams. Meanwhile, theses were rated the best at preparing students for further academic study, followed by applied research projects and then comprehensive exams.

Research question 2 asked about perceptions of how well applied projects and theses succeed in meeting the dimensions of evaluating scholarship proposed by Glassick et al. (1997). These dimensions include clarity of goals, adequacy of preparation, appropriateness of methods, significance of results, effectiveness of presentation, and reflective critique. There was a significance difference on one dimension, such that applied projects were rated as better at demonstrating effective presentation \( (M = 4.66, SD = .60) \) than theses \( (M = 4.44, SD = .72; t(31) = 2.239, p = .032) \). There were no differences on the other five dimensions of assessing scholarship between applied projects and theses, and the range of scores ranged from 4.39 to 4.78—less than half a point on a 5-point scale. Overall, these results suggest that current MA students and recent alumni see few differences between these two culminating experiences meeting academic scholarship criteria.

The final research question asked how each of the three culminating experience options fared at helping students demonstrate proficiency in NCA’s nine Communication Learning Outcomes. Results from multiple pairwise \( t \)-tests, contrasting projects to theses, projects to comprehensive exams, and theses to comprehensive exams are presented in Table 1.

Overall, applied projects and theses are rated as equally good (and better than comprehensive exams) on four of the nine outcomes, including: critically analyze messages, accomplish communicative goals, apply ethical communication and principles, and utilize communication to embrace difference. Of the remaining five learning outcomes, applied projects are rated significantly higher on two: create messages appropriate to audience, purpose, and context, and influence public discourse, while traditional theses are rated higher on three: describe the discipline and its central questions, employ theories, perspectives, and principles of communication, and engage in communication inquiry. A further, notable, takeaway is that comprehensive exams, perhaps unsurprisingly, is the lowest rated culminating experience across all nine communication learning outcomes (including only one outcome where it is significantly tied with applied projects for scoring lower than theses), describe the discipline and its central questions. These findings suggest that while applied projects and theses may individually better allow students to demonstrate competence in some of these learning outcomes that are critical to the discipline, they are...
perceived as more similar than not at adequately meeting these learning outcomes, with means well above the midpoint across all nine learning outcomes for both. Comprehensive exams are the standout culminating experience in this context (and not in a good way).

**Discussion**

Generally, our results show that our stakeholders believe applied projects, those student-led, client-connected, hands-on, experiential projects that address a real-world problem or topic through the creation of relevant deliverables, are more appropriate for preparing students for the workplace compared to both theses or comprehensive exams. In addition, and not surprisingly, students in our sample believe a thesis will better prepare a student for future PhD study compared to an applied project or comprehensive exam. Applied projects appear to be preferred to comprehensive exams on every aspect measured. This is an important finding that suggests students who are not interested in pursuing a doctorate degree are still interested in, and able to thrive in, a high-impact learning experience (Austin, 2002). Interestingly, students in our sample desire situations where they can apply their knowledge (through theses and applied projects) rather than just regurgitate memorized facts through comprehensive exams (Barbera et al., 2013).

While small in sample size (N = 32), the results of this survey, along with the previously demonstrated validity of the scholarship assessments outcomes (Gassick, 1997) and the communication learning outcomes (NCA), provide a great starting point for how to assess applied projects, and give us insight into the perceived value of applied projects, as well as other culminating experiences from a student perspective. Future research should certainly include larger samples of more diverse student populations. Hopefully, by improving the graduate student culminating experience we can address the concerns of Cassuto (2015) and revise our curricula to prepare students for work beyond the academy within a reasonable timeframe. Another relevant population of interest to include in future research are faculty members, especially those who are involved in admission committees for PhD programs, as well as employers of graduates of Communication Master’s programs. All of these are relevant stakeholders who could add to the breadth and depth of assessments made here. A qualitative first look—perhaps via focus groups or in-depth interviews may be a helpful first step, in order to capture differing perspectives than the ones presented here.

Specifically, certain results are important to consider when comparing the three culminating experiences. For one, we cannot ignore the fact that students perceive applied projects as more effective for workplace preparation when compared to thesis and comprehensive exams. Our communication graduate programs should, thus, consider offering applied projects as a legitimate culminating experience for those who will not pursue a career in the academy. Not surprisingly, the thesis option was rated as more effective for preparing students for a career in academic study. Holistically, these findings should give us pause and, at the very least make us reconsider how and why we offer comprehensive exams as a continued culminating experience option.

For purposes of developing our instructional materials located in the appendices, our results provide a rationale for applied project assessment. The primary goal of this research project was to define learning objectives based on previously collected and new data and create a rubric (Appendix A) for applied research projects. Our results demonstrate near-parity in student and alumni perceptions across theses and applied projects in their ability to demonstrate student competency across Glassick et al.’s (1997) dimensions of assessing scholarship and NCA’s communication learning outcomes.
To create our applied project learning objectives (Appendix B), we focused on six key ideas. Specifically, that students would submit projects that focus on shared communication goals; that a communication theory framework would be applied; that appropriate methodology would be used to solve communication challenges; that the deliverables created as a result of the project would align to the stated goals; that the project would be completed in an ethical manner; and that the student would reflect on their own work. These objectives, then, serve as the foundation for our rubric to subsequently assess applied projects.

Our rubric categories incorporated ideas from Glassick et al. (1997) as well as the National Communication Association communication learning outcomes. Specifically, based on the results of our survey, we focused on clarity of communication goals; the application of communication theory; messaging; methodology; influence and identification; the accomplishment of communication goals; ethical communication; deliverables that add to the field; and reflective critique. The results here provide insight not just into student perceptions of culminating experiences but were also helpful in creating useful instructional materials.

**Limitations**

Our study does have limitations. The most glaring limitation was the sample size of our survey population. We believe, however, that we specifically targeted individuals within our context, our own students and, even more specifically, we targeted students in our program or who recently graduated from our program who understand applied projects. We wanted, first and foremost, a resource for our student audience. After completion of this project, though, we believe our resources are applicable for other Communication graduate programs and can be revised to fit most applied projects that would address communication topics.

**Best Practice Suggestions for Instituting Applied Projects**

To continue the theme of practical and applied instructional strategies, we want to end with three best practices for incorporating applied projects at the graduate level.

First, remember that assessment is an ongoing cycle. Assessment, at the program level, or as an end-of-major tool, should measure student learning outcomes, present opportunities for students to achieve these learning outcomes, interpret evidence of student learning, and suggest programmatic improvement for better student learning (Wien, 2010). As such, applied projects should fit within the general scope of what your program is designed to do at the graduate level. If industry preparation is not a central focus of your graduate program goals, an applied project may not be an appropriate assessment mechanism for your student population.

Second, consider how the institution will evaluate the applied project deliverables. For something as inconsistent as an applied project, a standardized, institution-specific criterion-referenced measurement is appropriate and preferable (Rubin, 1999). And, further, the evaluation criteria should relate closely to the content, focus, and objectives of the program (Rubin, 1999).

Third, gather feedback from your own institution including current and former students, faculty, staff, and working professionals to create a unified language expectations surrounding applied projects. Use this information to create learning outcomes, clear and consistent guidelines, best practices, and so forth.
Ultimately, applied projects should be an option for students who may not want to pursue a doctorate, do not desire a thesis experience, or want something more practical to bookend their experience as a graduate student. If applied projects are an option for your institution, though, students and faculty must know what is expected.

Applied projects can be student-centered culminating experience alternatives to the more traditional thesis or comprehensive exam options at the graduate level. However, there is more work left to do. Future research surrounding applied projects should continue to develop best practices. In addition, now that a baseline rubric has been developed, we should measure the use of the rubric and continue to refine any dimensions that need addition or clarification.

References


# Appendix A: Applied Project Sample Rubric

|                                | Above Satisfactory                                                                 | Satisfactory                                                                 | Below Satisfactory                                                                 |
|                                | Communication and project goals are specific, measurable, and attainable. Establishes a clear directive and uses a strategic and disciplined approach. Goals are also connected to the discipline and specific needs of the external partner. | Communication and project goals are identifiable and present but lack creativity and depth. | Communication and project goals are not easily distinguishable and are not connected to the discipline and the needs of the external partner. |
| **Clarity of Communication Goals** | **Employ Theory, Perspectives, Principles, and Concepts** | Communication theory is used as a defining framework of the project. | Communication theory is used as a supplemental component of the project. | Communication theory is not identified or utilized effectively throughout the project. |
| **Messaging**                  | Create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context.                  | Create messages that are somewhat appropriate to the specific audience, purpose, and context but some information was not relevant, and messaging lacked creativity. | Messages were not appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context. |
| **Appropriate Methods**        | The project is completed using the appropriate methods to accomplish the established goals and methods are effectively applied. | Methods were appropriate for some of the established goals and were moderately applied. | The appropriate methods to accomplish the goals were not used nor applied. |
| **Influence and Identification** | Communication was used to determine various challenges but was not applied appropriately. | The challenges of the organization or client were not accurately identified, and a communication framework was not used to resolve the issues. |
| **Accomplishment of Communication Goals** | Communication goals were achieved within the constraints of the project. | Some communication goals were achieved but those that were not achieved were due to a planning or implementation issue and not a barrier created by the organization or client-partner. | Communication goals were not achieved. |
### Ethical Communication
- Fulfills the project in an ethical manner by communicating with an ethical intention and evaluating the ethical elements of the communication situation.
- Fulfills the project using ethical principles but they are not a focal point of the project.
- The project was completed unethically or the project did not address unethical communication issues.

### Results and Deliverables
- The completed project adds consequentially to the field and the project deliverables are appropriate and of high quality.
- The completed project was completed but deliverables were lacking in overall quality.
- The completed project did not add consequentially to the field and the project deliverables were not appropriate and were not of high quality.

### Reflective Critique
- The student critically evaluates their own work and uses evaluation to suggest improvements.
- The student's reflection is appropriate but lacks depth.
- The student did not critically evaluate their work and does not suggest improvements.

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**Appendix B: Sample Applied Project Learning Objectives**

Upon completion of this applied project, the student will:

**Outcome 1:** Submit a project that focuses on the stated communication goals of the client or organization.

**Outcome 2:** Complete a project that uses a communication theory framework to identify and resolve communication challenges.

**Outcome 3:** Use appropriate methodology to solve communication challenges.

**Outcome 4:** Create high-quality project deliverables that align to the stated communication goals.

**Outcome 5:** Complete a project that enforces and identifies ethical solutions.

**Outcome 6:** Critically reflect on their own work.
Encouraging Student Sense of Belonging Through Instructor Face Support

Nicholas R. Burk, and Amy R. Pearson

Keywords: student sense of belonging, organizational identification, face support, student persistence, structuration theory

Abstract: Research has established important links between student sense of belonging in the classroom and levels of academic engagement, motivation, and persistence (e.g., Jang et al., 2016; Reeve, 2012) yet more work is needed to identify specific teacher communication tactics and strategies that can foster sense of belonging and increased engagement. Using a conceptual framework centered on organizational identification, we surveyed 172 undergraduates and found that instructor interpersonal skills—specifically face support during student feedback—significantly correlated with increased class identification and sense of belonging. These results hold important implications for promoting student engagement, motivation, and persistence, particularly for underrepresented students.

Instructor Face Support as a Facilitator of Student Sense of Belonging

Research in teaching and learning has increasingly examined the ecological aspects of student learning and success. Building on major theoretical insights into human motivation and learning, such as Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs, Dewey’s (1958) experiential learning, and Bandura’s (1973, 1977, 1986) social

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Encouraging Student Sense of Belonging Through Instructor Face Support

learning theory, this area of research highlights how student learning is influenced by many interrelated social and contextual factors of the teaching environment that can inspire, facilitate, or hinder the learning process. One recent thread in this area of research focuses on students’ sense of belonging and how it impacts their academic experience and achievement. Generally used to describe the relationship of an individual to a group, “sense of belonging” more specifically indicates a particular quality of that relationship, such that a feeling of positivity, value, and attachment forms, and importantly, is perceived to be mutual by the student (St-Amand et al., 2017, p. 109). Over the last 30 years, sense of belonging has increasingly been used to bridge our understanding of why students may thrive in some settings but struggle in others.

Toward that end, this line of inquiry has established important links between students’ sense of belonging in the classroom and their levels of academic engagement, motivation, and persistence. For example, Johnson et al. (2007) demonstrated strong connections between sense of belonging, social support in the classroom, and students’ willingness to engage in activities and express their ideas and feelings. Furrer and Skinner (2003) found similar results in their longitudinal study, concluding that “feelings of belonging may have an energetic function, awakening enthusiasm, interest, and willingness to participate in academic activities” (p. 158). Researchers who study student motivation have also made important links to students’ sense of belonging. In a series of studies, Goodenow (1993a, 1993b; Goodenow & Grady, 1993) found that sense of belonging at school and in the classroom consistently correlated with students’ high value placed on academics and high expectations for success, particularly when inspired by teacher support. Goodenow’s findings were corroborated by Freeman et al. (2007) when they studied college freshmen and found that students who felt a strong sense of class belonging also measured high in self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation.

More recently, sense of belonging has also developed into a key construct in research on university retention and student persistence, particularly for the role it plays in community-building. Vincent Tinto’s (1975) influential essay Dropout from Higher Education inspired threads of research examining student involvement in both the social and academic dimensions of the college experience, as he argued that each are important factors in retention. Tinto’s later research (1993, 1998) went on to stress the importance of building communities on campus and in the classroom to combat attrition and foster student persistence. Building on Tinto’s work, Osterman (2000) conducted an integrative review, highlighting sense of belonging as an “extremely important concept” toward building connected communities, with “far reaching impact on human motivation and behavior” (p. 359). These foundational essays have inspired conceptual models of university retention (e.g., Davis et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2003; Reason, 2009) that are built upon students’ sense of belonging in social, academic, and other extracurricular contexts, emphasizing their interrelatedness. Together, these research directions connecting student sense of belonging to engagement, motivation, and persistence establish it as a central concept in how we currently understand student achievement and success.

Despite these strides in recognizing the importance of students’ sense of belonging, more work remains to better understand how it can be fostered in various school settings and classrooms. For one, research has not yet established whether sense of belonging is equally important or functions differently for adult or college-aged students than for K–12 students. Much of the literature thus far focuses on K–12 classrooms (e.g., Allen & Bowles, 2012; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2010; St-Amand et al., 2017; Wentzel, 1998), whereas adult or college-aged classrooms are organized differently; often with less supervision, less structure, and more student
autonomy and diversity. These differences may change the role or quality of students’ sense of belonging, and more research is needed to explore sense of belonging at the college level, in various types of classrooms. Second, the above point also implicates another, more important need: we currently lack a clear understanding of what particular actions that administrators and teachers can take to establish and foster a strong sense of student belonging in the classroom, particularly at the college level. Thus far, scholarship offering specific strategies is relatively scant, and primarily focuses on K–12 teachers. A prominent source here is Osterman (2010), who reviews prior studies on sense of belonging with an aim toward identifying and synthesizing best practices for teachers. She concludes that a strong sense of belonging among students tends to result from constructive classroom management, particularly when handling “problem” students, and stresses the need for teachers’ attentiveness and interpersonal skills. Similarly, St-Amand et al. (2017) offer six recommendations for teachers, again focusing on K–12, which largely echoes Osterman (2010). They too highlight the need for teachers’ interpersonal skills but also suggest school-level practices, such as team-building activities and social-competence curriculum for students. While these guidelines certainly provide a useful starting point for K–12 teachers and administrators, they are not clearly or easily translatable to the college level. Thus, further exploration and research on specific strategies for college-level instructors is an important need moving forward.

The current essay responds to this need by providing study findings that establish a new promising tack for understanding and facilitating a sense of belonging among college students. Specifically, we extend the prior K–12 emphasis on teachers’ interpersonal skills into the college classroom by examining students’ perceptions of instructors’ verbal feedback and its impact on their sense of belonging in the class. The novelty of our approach is that we draw on a theoretical framework in organizational communication that provides a conceptualization of sense of belonging as an organizational phenomenon that can be facilitated by communication practices. We anticipate that instructors who provide verbal feedback to students in a way that affirms and respects their standing in the class will also succeed in building stronger class identification among all students. To examine instructors’ verbal feedback, we employ Erving Goffman’s (1967) face theory and Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) concept of politeness to measure instructors’ ability to fulfill students’ social identity needs toward confirming their group belonging in the classroom. Using this conceptual framework linking organizational class identification and instructor face support, we test these potential links by designing a study surveying 172 students enrolled in university public speaking classes, to measure and correlate their assessment of the instructor’s use of face support with their own level of identification to the class. By doing so, we aim to establish the usefulness of this conceptual approach while also providing instructors clear guidelines on how to foster student belonging by increasing their identification with the class.

In the next section, we review prior literature that (a) establishes the precedent and value of a theoretical framework in organizational communication that can conceptually link instructor communication practices with students’ belonging in the classroom; (b) defines and explores organizational identification as a key concept; and (c) articulates politeness theory and face support by establishing how they provide important links between personal, social, and organizational identity. Finally, we conclude our conceptual framework by providing a study hypothesis that, when tested, can confirm a link between instructor face support and class identification.

**Conceptual Framework**

Studying classrooms from an organizational perspective is not without precedent, and it holds some distinct advantages toward integrating the various ways that prior research has proven student sense
of belonging to be important. Osterman (2000) argues that taking an organizational perspective on teaching can make visible the relationship between student behavior and organizational context (p. 325). Moreover, research has also emphasized organizations as prominent settings in which social identity is developed and negotiated, particularly insofar as many social group identifications are available within organizations (Silva & Sias, 2010). Aligning with these recognitions, a pedagogical research program has developed that conceives the classroom-as-organization (CAO), stressing that students, as experiential learners, are inevitably involved in the “interaction of intentional, cultural, behavioral, and social aspects of managing an organization” (McDonald et al., 2011, p. 67). This perspective is especially useful when studying classrooms because it highlights the dynamic and participatory nature of classroom culture. While the instructor is certainly an academic authority in the college classroom (Grasha, 1994), students also contribute to the meanings that emerge from the class (Kasworm, 2003), particularly during classroom discussions (Rudsberg et al., 2017). During such discussions, students can influence each other with connotative meanings of course material, perceptions about each other’s work and ideas, or stances toward the instructor’s teaching practices. Key to our approach is that, since classroom meanings are negotiated concomitant with social meanings, organizational communication theory offers a means of modeling how they are mutually constituted through classroom communication. For this study, the structurational model of organizational identification (C. R. Scott et al., 1998) provides a framework for examining how student identification and, by extension, sense of belonging in the classroom, are influenced by their perception of the instructor’s ability to provide feedback during class discussions of their work.

**Structurational Model of Identification**

C. R. Scott et al. (1998) built on Anthony Giddens’s (1979, 1984) structuration theory to provide a model that links together communication and classroom sense of belonging through a process of identification. A hallmark of structuration theory is its central focus on “duality of structure,” which views the structural or relatively durable aspects of society or organizations as not merely the antecedents of personal action and agency, but also as reliant on (or constituted by) the practices, behaviors, and communication of individuals. In this way, Giddens (1984) argues, organizational structure and individuals’ agency are mutually constitutive. For example, traditional classroom structure provides a general framework of rules and practices for the first day of class, which students will tend to assume are applicable and thus follow. But thereafter, the rules, practices, and routines for each class may evolve somewhat differently, depending on the interplay of numerous factors, such as the instructor’s teaching style, the course material, curriculum design, the students’ level of interest, among other factors. And further, to the degree that an innovative class may influence students’ notions of the “ideal” classroom, their later behavior and communication may spread to gradually change broad conceptions of classroom tradition. This example demonstrates that, while organizational or societal structures inform how students experience the university classroom, those very structures are also in flux, as they are in turn negotiated through practices and interactions in the class.

One such class attribute that can be negotiated through communication is the strength of belonging that students experience in the class. C. R. Scott et al. (1998) draw on Giddens’s duality of structure to provide a means of conceptualizing how students’ sense of belonging in the classroom can be understood as a type of organizational identification that facilitates a strong sense of identity in the class. They do so by viewing organizational identification as a duality of structure connecting members’ interactions with their sense of organizational belonging or attachment. Important to their argument is that we all develop multiple organizational identities, one for each of the organizations in which we have membership. In
this view, identity “represents a type of knowledge about our self that helps to produce and to reproduce behaviors in specific social situations” (C. R. Scott et al., 1998, p. 303). In any given situation, even in the classroom, students can have multiple organizational identities that become relevant and that may influence their interactions; for instance, that of a student/learner, a fraternity/sorority member, an athlete, a church member, a worker at a business in town, and so forth. Furthermore, given that we have multiple simultaneous organizational identities, C. R. Scott et al. (1998) assert that we become attached to each identity in varying strengths. For example, a student may have a strong sense of identity as an athlete, they may prefer to be viewed in that way in the classroom and thus would interact primarily through that particular identity, potentially even at the expense of a student or academic identity. The differing strengths of identity attachment can be understood as a function of the process of identification (C. R. Scott et al., 1998, p. 304). In this conception, identification is a demonstration, through an accumulation of communicative acts, of a sense of connectedness with a person or group. “Often made in social interaction, identification in a structurational sense represents the type of behavior produced by and producing identity” (C. R. Scott et al., 1998, p. 304). Consequently, identity and identification form a duality of structure, because although identification constitutes an evolving identity, our sense of identity alternately influences the likelihood of identification with people or culture in different contexts. In this way, a student’s sense of belonging in the classroom can be understood in terms of their attachment to, or strength of, their identity as a student in the class. And importantly, this attachment to their class organizational identity evolves through time, depending on the nature of the classroom interactions, which accumulatively influence their level of identification.

Recent work in structuration theory has examined not only the duality of structure in identification/identity development processes, but also highlights the duality of structure between member identity construction and organizational structures and features. These studies center communication as the mechanism through which both member identities and organizational attributes, such as member roles, power, norms/routines, and culture are negotiated and reproduced, a process described as “reflexive self-structuring” (McPhee et al., 2014, p. 82). For example, C. R. Scott and Myers (2010) developed a structurational model of organizational socialization that diagrams how member identities are constituted through complex processes involving interactive re/negotiation of existing organizational norms and rules, role expectations, and power relations, all of which may change as a result of member role incongruence and friction. In other words, organizational members inevitably must develop identities around existing rules and resources but may reflexively alter them in the process. This type of identity/structure negotiation was demonstrated in Larson and Pepper’s (2011) study of a geographically dispersed high-tech company in which members dis-identified with required technology systems and developed identities around the unintended (e.g., non-sanctioned) use of the technology. In so doing, workers weakened their organizational identity attachment, but in turn, also altered the norms surrounding the technology. Similarly, McNamee (2011) explored processes of identity development and attachment in faith-based organizations, finding that fostering strong member identities required them to compartmentalize or bracket business affairs away from faith-centered processes and conversations, thus deliberately reinforcing the symbolic significance of faith-based narratives in the organizational culture. Finally, a structuration approach has also been used to study organizational identification processes of university students. Croucher et al. (2009) examined college students’ levels of identification with forensics teams, focusing on the influence of team culture on identification processes. They found that particular aspects of culture, such as teamwork, information flow, and morale, were important targets of students’ identification with the team, but surprisingly, that the influence of these cultural factors varied significantly across team members of different genders and ethnicities. In sum, through these studies,
we gain a better understanding of how organizational structures provide rules and resources for member identification and identity development, encompassing a duality of structure. But Croucher et al.’s (2009) findings in particular highlight that organization-level structures are not experienced in the same way by all members, with gender and ethnicity playing important mitigating roles in identification processes.

In summary, this structurational perspective of communication and organizational identification provides the groundwork for our view of the college classroom. Most centrally, it situates students as having an organizational class identity that may vary in strength and that is continually evolving throughout the semester. Furthermore, it provides the mechanism for understanding how those identities emerge over time: the duality of structure between student identification processes and classroom-level features, both of which are constituted through class interactions. With this structurational approach to examining classroom identification established, we turn our sights to a particular type of classroom interaction that is likely to influence the process of class identification: instructor feedback and the use of face support.

**Face Support as Negotiating Grounds for Class Identification**

Given that classroom interactions are the means through which class identification may occur, it follows that the nature of those interactions should be examined to better understand how to facilitate this process. One way that classroom interactions can be examined is through face support and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Lim & Bowers, 1991). Goffman (1967) uses the term “face” to refer to an individual’s desired self-image—an image they hope to present and maintain through their interactions with others. Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978) suggests that all interactions contain negotiations of face needs being either met or denied among participants of the interaction. The concept of “face support” represents the strategies that participants use in those negotiations of face needs and, in particular, as a response to others’ face needs.

Face needs have been conceptualized under two primary desires. First, positive face refers to individuals’ needs to feel included, appreciated, and approved of by members of a social group. Second, negative face refers to the individual’s need for his/her autonomy and abilities to be respected. On a more specific level, Lim and Bowers (1991) conceptualized face needs into three primary groups: the desire to be included (solidarity or fellowship face), the desire for one’s abilities to be respected (approbation or competence face), and the desire for one’s autonomy to be affirmed (tact or autonomy face). Within classroom interactions, these face needs may or may not be met; meeting them requires instructors to utilize interpersonal skills.

Within the classroom, particularly important interactions occur between student and instructor. Given the instructor’s legitimate power status in the class, it follows that an instructor’s ability to offer face support holds important implications for the fulfillment of face needs amongst students. This heightened importance of instructor-student interactions is especially true for verbal evaluations with the class as an audience. The instructor’s failure to meet one student’s face needs in front of the entire class may challenge and alter socially-negotiated student identities.

We expect that meeting the specific face needs of solidarity, approbation, and tact is an important factor for providing interactions that foster classroom identification. We further expect that a particularly important opportunity for face support occurs during verbal feedback of student work, with the entire class as an audience. Hence, in this study we surveyed students about the perceived face support they receive from their instructors during verbal feedback for speeches delivered to the class.
Examining the Impact of Perceptions of Facework on Class Identification

In summary, this study examines how communication in the college classroom between student and instructor affects student identification with the class. Structuration theory holds that identities are socially constructed through interaction and provides the reason why an instructor’s ability to provide appropriate face support to students is important in terms of inviting stronger student identities. We chose to examine face support as a specific communicative act instructors employ because it provides an opportunity for the instructor to affirm or deny student identity within the classroom. Specifically, we examine how student identification (as demonstrated by perception of belonging and a strong degree of attachment with the class) is affected as solidarity, tact, and approbation face needs (Lim & Bowers, 1991) are addressed during the evaluation of public speeches. To verify our expectation that instructor face support predicts stronger class identification, we test the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Instructors’ use of politeness strategies characterized by student assessments of (a) solidarity/inclusiveness, (b) tact/autonomy, and (c) approbation/competence face support during speech verbal feedback sessions will be positively associated with measures of students’ class identification.

**Method**

**Participants**

For this study, we surveyed a convenience sample of 176 undergraduate students in public speaking classes at a medium-sized university in the Northwestern United States. They were selected specifically because they were enrolled in a public speaking course and therefore received verbal feedback from their instructor in front of the class. Our response rate was 98% (n = 176); only 4 out of 180 students in the 10 public speaking classes we surveyed chose not to participate in this study. We had to discard a total of four questionnaires due to response sets or incompletion, which brought our total usable data down to 172 questionnaires.

All of our participants were undergraduate students. A slight majority (53.5%, n = 92) of our participants identified as male, and 46.5% (n = 80) identified as female. The mean age of our participants was 20.23 years (SD = 3.98), the mode was 19, and age range was 32 years (our oldest student was 50 years old while our youngest participant was 18 years of age). In terms of ethnicity, 85.5% (n = 147) of our participants were Caucasian, 4.7% (n = 8) were Asian, and 1.7% (n = 3) were Native American. There were 6.4% percent (n = 11) categorized as “other” and 1.7% (n = 3) gave no response. The class standing of our participants broke down as follows: 45.9% (n = 79) of students were freshmen, 33.7% (n = 58) were sophomores, 11.6% (n = 20) were juniors, and 8.7% (n = 15) were seniors. Participants included a broad array of major areas of study.

**Procedure**

We recruited students by attending their public speaking classes at a prearranged date and time. The negotiated dates corresponded to a point in time during the semester when the second speech assignment—the informative speech—had just concluded; therefore ensuring that all classes had ample time for not only verbal feedback to be given by the instructor for two assigned speeches, but also for the class to have developed its own style of interaction and opportunities for class identification. Participating
students were provided a consent form and a questionnaire. To ensure they felt free to respond without consequence, we visited classrooms during the last 25 minutes of class and had the course instructor leave the classroom before distributing the questionnaires. To encourage participation, course instructors agreed to provide an incentive in the form of five extra credit points toward participants’ course grade. The three-part questionnaires encompassed 39 questions and were completed by all participants within 20 minutes. As students returned questionnaires to the surveyor, they recorded their names on a sign-out sheet separate from the questionnaires, for the purpose of ensuring the award of extra credit points. This extra credit sheet, and the names on it, were never linked to individual surveys, to ensure anonymity of student survey responses.

**Measures**

**Politeness and face support.** We used the Instructional Face Support Scale (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003) to measure the degree to which students perceived their instructor used tact, approbation, and solidarity face support during speech feedback. Students were instructed to indicate the degree to which 15 statements reflect their instructor’s behavior during oral feedback of speeches. This was a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Six items were reverse-coded. Five items (e.g., The instructor “leaves you without a choice about how to respond to the evaluation”) in this scale indicated instructor fulfillment of student autonomy (tact) face needs (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003, p. 381). Five items (e.g., The instructor “lets you know that s/he thinks highly of you”) indicated instructor fulfillment of student competence (approbation) face needs. Finally, five items (e.g., The instructor “seems attentive to you as an individual”) indicated instructor fulfillment of student fellowship (solidarity) face needs. Collectively, these items demonstrated face validity in concert with Lim and Bowers’s (1991) conceptualization of three types of face support needs. Consistent with Kerssen-Griep et al. (2003), we found the reliabilities for the three face support types to be acceptable (tact α = .73, approbation α = .70, and solidarity α = .74).

**Class Identification.** To measure identification as sense of belonging and attachment to the class, we used Cheney’s (1982) Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ). While this scale was initially developed to measure organizational identification in the workplace, it has been used on numerous occasions to measure identification of groups in various contexts, including graduate students (Bullis & Bach, 1989), small workgroups (Barker & Tompkins, 1994), professional memberships (Russo, 1998), and government workers (C. R. Scott et al., 1999). In many of these studies, reduced-item versions were utilized. To make this scale appropriate for measurement of undergraduate class identification, we removed items from the original 25-item scale pertaining only to a workplace organization. For example, one removed item included, “I would probably continue working for _______ even if I did not need the money” (Cheney, 1982). We also made slight changes to the wording of some questions to make them appropriate for classroom identification. For example, we changed the original ninth question in the OIQ which stated: “I talk up _____ to my friends as a great company to work for” to “I talk up this public speaking class as a great class to take.” After the removal of questions that could not be adapted to the classroom context, we were left with 15 out of 25 items from the original OIQ.

The reliability and validity of the OIQ has been questioned in previous research (Miller et al., 2000). Miller et al.’s primary concern was that the OIQ instrument was not unidimensional, but rather measured various aspects of affective commitment to the organization. To test the validity of the OIQ for this study, we followed Schrodt (2002) and Croucher et al. (2009) to complete a confirmation factor analysis (CFA) in order to test the factor structure, internal consistency, and unidimensionality of the measure (see Table 1). The CFA revealed that 14 of the 15 items loaded on organizational identification at .60 or
higher, with only one item factor loading slightly lower at .52. This item was retained because the scale as a whole, including this item, passed the internal reliability tests. Inter-item reliability tests for the scale were acceptable (α = .868).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ) Items and Factor Loading</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Items</td>
<td>Factor Loading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. In general, students in this class are working toward the same goals.</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I’m happy to be in this class.</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Our public speaking class is different than other public speaking classes.</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I’m glad to be in this public speaking class rather than a different public speaking class.</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I talk up this public speaking class to my friends as a good class to be in.</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I’m willing to put in an effort for this class above and beyond what is normally expected.</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I have good feelings about coming to this class.</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I feel that the people in this class care about me.</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I have a lot in common with the people in this class.</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I tell others about projects I am working on for this class.</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I find that my values are similar to the values of the rest of this class.</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I feel very little loyalty to this class (R).</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I would describe this class as a large “family” in which most students feel a sense of belonging.</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I find it easy to identify myself with this class.</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I really care about how well this class goes.</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Our hypothesis predicted that students who perceive their face needs being met by instructors during verbal evaluation of speeches will have higher levels of class identification. To test this, we ran Pearson Correlations (Table 1) analyzing the relationship between the dependent variable (class identification) and the independent variables (tact face support, approbation face support, and solidarity face support). The hypothesis was supported, as all forms of face support correlated significantly with class identification:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Correlations Among Types of Face Support and Class Identification</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Class Identification</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tact Face Support</td>
<td>.447**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Approbation Face Support</td>
<td>.381**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Solidarity Face Support</td>
<td>.603**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N = 172; ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.
The matrix also revealed significant correlations between solidarity face support and both of the other types of face support: tact ($r = .70, p < .01$) and approbation ($r = .62, p < .01$), as well as a significant correlation between tact face support and approbation face support ($r = .58, p < .01$).

To measure the relative influence of each independent variable, we also performed a Least Squares Multivariate Linear Regression with Class Identification being regressed onto the three predictor variables (IVs): Solidarity Face Support, Tact Face Support, and Approbation Face Support. The full model was found to be significant ($F_{(3,168)} = 32.47, p < .001, R = .61$). The $R^2$ for this model was .367, indicating that 36.7 percent of the variance in class identification could be explained by some combination of the three IVs.

Given the apparent heightened significance of solidarity face support, we conducted a reduced model containing only solidarity as the IV predictor of class identification, which resulted in $R = .60$ with $R^2 = .360$ indicating that the independent contribution of tact and approbation accounted for only 0.7% of the variance in class identification.

**Discussion**

The results of this study demonstrate a significant positive relationship between students’ perception of instructor face support during speech feedback and their strength of identification with the class. These results confirm our expectation that instructors who utilize interpersonal skills in providing face support to students during verbal feedback effectively increase the likelihood of those students identifying more strongly with the class. Furthermore, an unanticipated, yet still positive finding was the particularly important role of solidarity face support in this process. Regression analyses showed that solidarity face support alone predicted strong class identification and that the other two types of face support contributed only marginally to this relationship. In this discussion section, we reflect on some important implications of these results, focusing on (a) the basis provided here for emphasizing the role of instructor interpersonal communication skills toward establishing an inviting classroom environment; (b) the heightened significance of solidarity face support in this process and what it may indicate about the instructor’s role in the classroom and on campus; and (c) the potential impact of these findings on student persistence and university retention.

**Instructor Interpersonal Skills**

A key goal of this study was to address the need for further research identifying ways that instructors and administrators could facilitate the process of student belonging by increasing identification with their classes. This study has provided a partial answer to this research gap by demonstrating that instructor interpersonal skills in the form of face support at key times can account for more than a third (our model suggested 36.7%) of the variance in class identification among students. To be certain, there are likely to be many factors that influence student identification and sense of belonging in the classroom. However, our study findings have taken an important step by verifying the central role that instructors play toward affirming students’ belonging in the class through their verbal feedback messages.

This finding emphasizes the multifaceted role that instructors play in the classroom, particularly expressed in the way they respond to student work. Their response must at once balance the task dimension of feedback, specifying the need and means for conceptual improvement, while also recognizing the relational dimension of their message, indicating the value and respect the instructor
Encouraging Student Sense of Belonging Through Instructor Face Support

While instructors are commonly hired for their demonstrated expertise in the field, which ensures that they can provide corrective task feedback, they are not always held to account for demonstrating sensitivity toward the relational dimension of that feedback. These study results thus follow Frymier and Houser (2000) by highlighting the need for instructors to recognize these dual dimensions of their feedback and likewise to embrace their role in fostering mutually satisfying classroom relationships.

By emphasizing the relational aspects of teaching, this study contributes to a growing list of findings that illustrate the relational lens through which students perceive and experience effective instruction. While this study established that students are more likely to feel a sense of identification and belonging to the class when they perceive instructors fulfilling their face needs during feedback, other studies have demonstrated that students rely on their perceptions of the instructor for their sense of classroom justice (Chory, 2007), for their levels of intrinsic motivation (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Jussim et al., 1992), and classroom involvement (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003). Together, these established connections between instructor communication and student outcomes reinforce the need for instructors to not only describe principles of effective communication, but also to embody them in their teaching.

The Significance of Solidarity Face Support

Another important issue raised by these results is the heightened significance of solidarity face support in the process of class identification. In this study, not only did solidarity face support show the highest reliability, but it also had the strongest correlation with class identification. We interpret this as a particularly important finding because it makes clear the high priority that group belonging holds for students in the classroom. For students to develop class identification that welcomes engagement, motivation, and learning, their class status must be affirmed, particularly in times when they receive negative feedback that may threaten or make vulnerable that sense of group belonging. Thus, a foundational aspect of fostering student success in the classroom may be established when instructors affirm students’ sense of belongingness, more so than affirming their autonomy or competence. As Kerssen-Griep et al. (2003) suggest, solidarity face support may “motivate by affirming the student's sense of membership in the learning group, thus mitigating the feedback's threat to the student's fellowship face and focusing attention on the student's work rather than his/her person” (p. 373). By affirming a student's status and value in the class, an instructor can help ease the insecurity associated with being rejected as a valid class member, thereby facilitating more content-focused interactions. This finding suggests that a classroom is indeed an organizational context that illustrates Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs model, emphasizing that a student’s need for belonging must be fulfilled before they engage toward becoming a valued member of the class.

This potential of solidarity face support to “set the stage” for student sense of belonging with the class also reinforces the value provided by a structurational view of organizational identification in the classroom. Though students may have multiple identification targets in the classroom, and thus multiple social identities they may enact, these study results suggest that the interactions constituted between their class performances and the instructor’s verbal feedback of them provides a mechanism through which the student becomes more or less attached to their class identity in particular. The usefulness of this insight can be further recognized if we consider its potential for reinterpreting prior research. For example, existing research has established links between the perceived fairness of instructor feedback and its effect on students’ sense of classroom justice (Paulsel et al., 2005). According to Paulsel et al., an instructor’s critical feedback may be perceived by students as a form of negative coercive power instead
of well-intended expert power, potentially resulting in a sense of unfairness for the student, which may instill a mistrust of classroom justice. Examined from a structurational view of class identification, we may find that if an instructor verbally critiques a student’s work without using face support, the instructor effectively invokes or widens a power gap between them, leaving the student with bleak options: either accept a low-status, unattractive class identity offered by the instructor, or reject it and become less identified with the class. In sum, the insight provided by a structurational view of identification is in providing a means of examining specific classroom interactions for their impact on the process of class identification and, by extension, student sense of belonging.

**Structurational Approach to Student Persistence and Retention**

Another important implication of these findings is the extended impact of structurational class identification on the overall experience of college students. Consistent with prior research in structuration theory (e.g., Croucher et al., 2009; Larson & Pepper, 2011; C. Scott & Myers, 2010), these results suggest that instructors’ interpersonal skill in using face support tactics has a simultaneous duality of impact: first, on strengthening students’ classroom identity, as discussed above, but also on the overall structure of the class itself. Moreover, this study helps demonstrate that instructor verbal feedback not only plays a role in the identity construction of the student targeted by the feedback, but it also helps establish class-wide attributes such as communication climate or culture. This implicates instructor communication skill as particularly important for contributing to the sense of belonging that students feel both inside the classroom, and importantly, at the university as a whole. To the degree that students experience a sense of belonging in each of their classes, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging at the university, which has impacts on their overall persistence.

For example, Reason (2009) provides a model that theorizes the influences on student persistence into three broad areas: (1) precollege experiences; (2) the university’s organizational context (e.g., demographics and behavioral climate); and (3) individual student experiences within the peer environment. Reason places classroom experiences as a prominent site for the third area, where students most regularly engage peers in a structured organizational environment and where the work of college is primary administered. In this way, while instructors may not be the only university representative that students encounter, they are commonly the most frequent and consequential; such that classroom experiences contribute prominently to the university’s organizational context as well (Reason’s second area). Thus, by embracing their role in fostering classroom identification, instructors can, in turn, have a positive impact on the processes of student identification with the university.

These potential connections between sense of belonging, class identification, and student persistence are particularly salient when considering the historically elevated rates of minority students leaving college. Students among marginalized populations may be more apt to question their sense of belonging in the classroom, which may make them more sensitive to instructor feedback (Smith & King, 2004). This possibility may be evidenced by Carter’s (2006) report that African American’s persistence rates declined after declaring particular majors, indicating that their experience in classes within their major may not have met their needs or expectations. Moreover, scholars have increasingly used sense of belonging to study the experience of minority, marginalized, or non-traditional student groups, including African American women (Booker, 2016), women in STEM disciplines (Master et al., 2015; Master & Meltzoff, 2020; Rattan et al., 2018), working-class students (Soria & Stebleton, 2013), and veterans (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018). It follows to reason that instructor’s feedback and use of face support, particularly for
these marginalized groups, can have a greater impact on minority students’ persistence by strengthening their class identification, and by extension, their institutional identification.

In summary, these findings establishing the role of face support in fostering classroom identification are important in at least three ways. First, this study establishes the importance of instructors’ communication skills toward increasing sense of belonging for students within the classroom. Second, these findings highlight the particular importance of group solidarity for students in the classroom, and in so doing, they reinforce the usefulness of a structurational view of organizational identification toward studying student sense of belonging. Finally, these study results offer a promising approach toward better understanding student persistence, particularly for marginalized or underrepresented students who may be least likely to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom.

**Limitations**

Though promising, these study findings have limitations primarily due to our participant sample. First, because we used convenience sampling at a mid-sized Midwestern university, our results are limited in terms of ethnicity. Specifically, 85% of our participants were White. Although this distribution may be representative of the ethnic diversity of students taking public speaking at the current university, more research at other universities is needed to better generalize these results to a more diverse student population. Second, though our results hinted at possible correlations between instructor gender and perceptions of feedback face support, we only had one male instructor among the 10 public speaking classes we surveyed. Consequently, this sample size did not warrant analysis of the role of instructor gender, and these potential effects require further study. Finally, this study is limited by the use of public speaking classes for recruitment of study participants. Though public speaking classes provide a context in which instructor feedback has heightened performative significance, not all classes have such visible displays or occasions of instructor feedback. Though we argue that feedback likely plays a similar role in those classes, the situational use of instructor feedback requires study for their unique effects on class identification.

**Future Research**

This study prompts the need for further research in a number of directions. First, replicating this study in a university with greater diversity would enable richer understandings of the effects of identity aspects such as gender and race. As discussed above, this is especially true for examining populations that are historically underrepresented in universities and particular university classes. For instance, further research in a more diverse setting could examine whether instructor feedback impacts social identity groups differently in the same class.

Along these lines, other aspects of the classroom environment could be studied for their impact on class identification. For example, some research has noted the impact of peer group behavior on classroom culture and climate (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1997). Friend groups and the input of neighboring students may play a mitigating role in how students perceive instructor feedback. Connectedly, additional research may be needed to explicate the specific communicative tactics that influence students’ interpretation of face support during feedback.
References
Encouraging Student Sense of Belonging Through Instructor Face Support


The Influence of Course Format, Student Characteristics, and Perceived Teacher Communication and Behavior on Instructional Outcomes Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Elizabeth E. Graham, Heather L. Walter, and Tang Tang

Keywords: COVID-19, cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, intent to persist in college, instructional formats

Abstract: Two studies examined instructional format (intact vs. hybrid and remote vs. online), classroom climate, student characteristics (engagement and communication apprehension), perceived teacher communication and behavior (teacher competence, clarity, caring), and their influence on instructional outcomes, including cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to persist in college pre-pandemic and during the pandemic. The findings highlight the important role teacher characteristics (caring, clarity, competence) played in instructional outcomes. This study also revealed that high levels of engagement signals students’ willingness to participate in the learning process. Students are a driving force in their own cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to persist in college. No statistically significant differences were found in instructional outcomes across various instructional formats.

Introduction

Since instructional communication first emerged as an area of study, scholars have been challenged to identify teacher and student behaviors that have a profound effect on student success. There are several instructional communication theories and models that focus on the impact of teacher behaviors and
student characteristics on the teaching–learning process. For example, McCroskey et al.’s 2004 General Model of Instructional Communication identifies constructs responsible for affective and cognitive learning. Likewise, Weber et al. (2011) developed the Instructional Beliefs Model that is a three-tiered theory that suggests teacher behaviors, student characteristics, and course structural issues combine to influence students’ instructional beliefs. According to Weber et al. these instructional beliefs then drive affective and cognitive student learning.

These prior research efforts informed this study and we relied on several instructional communication factors pertinent to learning and teacher evaluation. In particular, McCroskey and colleagues’ research concluded that teacher temperament, students’ perceptions of their teachers’ source credibility, and task attractiveness were associated with learning. Consistent with McCroskey’s model, Weber et al.’s Instructional Beliefs Theory also suggested that student learning is influenced by teacher communication, student characteristics, course organization, and structural issues (i.e., classroom policies and procedures, and course assignments and workload). While this present research effort reflected a similar pursuit, that is, determining the communication factors that influence student learning, and several of the same variables were employed, there were several departures as well. Most importantly, we examined instructional format (i.e., intact, hybrid, remote, online) and environment, as a defining framework and as an influencing factor of student learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to persist through college.

Because the global pandemic began after our first study and during our second study, we took advantage of the unique research opportunity afforded to us to compare instructional formats for possible differences in learning outcomes. Specifically, we examined instructional format (intact vs. hybrid and remote vs. online), classroom climate, student characteristics (engagement and communication apprehension), perceived teacher communication and behavior (teacher competence, clarity, and caring), and their influence on instructional outcomes, including cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to persist in college pre-pandemic (November 2019) and during the pandemic (April 2021).

**Instructional Format and Environment**

The first factors considered were course format and the classroom climate of the basic communication course. The basic communication course has been dubbed the “front porch” of the communication discipline as it introduces students to the field and often recruits undergraduates into the communication major (Beebe, 2013). The basic course is currently taught, nationwide, in a variety of delivery formats, all of which are worthy of assessment and consideration for their instructional outcomes (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2020).

The system comprising the instructional environment is holistic with teachers and students mutually influencing each other, all within a dynamic and ever-evolving classroom environment (Witt et al., 2014). As noted by Kearney and Beatty (1994), the classroom is a highly interdependent system of interrelated components subsuming a multitude of teacher and student behaviors. Course format is an integral component of this system and the present studies attempted to define its relationship with a number of other key variables in the learning environment. For these reasons, the instructional environment is a central element in this study.

The traditional intact face-to-face (F2F) basic course format, the most prevalent course delivery method pre-pandemic (Morreale et al., 2016), consists of approximately 20–25 students receiving instruction...
from one instructor, at one point in time, in a shared classroom space. Indeed, the face-to-face format is considered to be superior to other platforms (Fassett & Atay, 2022). Regardless, over the last few decades, declining student enrollment and shrinking budgets, coupled with pedagogical advances, and enhanced technology prompted communication programs to implement innovative delivery methods in the basic communication course. In addition to the traditional intact F2F (hereafter referred to as intact), hybrid and asynchronous online formats have also become ubiquitous. The hybrid format features a portion of the course delivered online with F2F recitation sections devoted to speech presentations and student activities (Sellnow & Martin, 2010). The hybrid model offers greater instructional consistency, decreased cost of delivering a high enrollment course, and streamlined administrative oversight. The hybrid format provides highly consistent, assessment-friendly, student-driven online lectures, while maintaining regular in-person contact with students to counter known issues of low motivation, trust, and to develop a positive classroom climate via the recitation experience (Zuhri & Amiruddin, 2021).

Several research teams (Abdullah et al., 2019; Broeckelman-Post et al., 2020; Mahoney et al., 2017; Zuhri & Amiruddin, 2021) concluded that students in the blended (hybrid) courses scored higher than the intact group on some cognitive, behavioral, and affective measures and performance skills, while decreasing levels of communication apprehension. Alternatively, Cox and Todd (2001) revealed that students enrolled in the intact course reported more instructor credibility, student motivation, and immediacy than students who experienced the hybrid course format. Furthermore, intact formats benefit from the long-held and enviable perception that this format provides students with a better educational experience (Wright, 2022).

A third course format increasingly featured in the basic course is the asynchronous online model. Broeckelman-Post et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive assessment of online versus intact public speaking courses and found that despite expectations, there was no significant difference in speech performance or course performance. However, online courses did produce significantly higher student drop and failure rates than F2F courses. These results highlight the assumption that F2F courses are largely a superior instructional format.

In addition to the instructional course format, classroom climate is an important contributor to the instructional environment. Dwyer et al. (2004) defined a connected classroom climate as “student-to-student perceptions of a supportive and cooperative communication environment in the classroom” (p. 267). Previous research suggested that social support can increase academic achievement (Cutrona et al., 1994). A connected classroom climate is positively correlated with connectedness to students in class, a history of making friends in the class, motivation to enroll in another class with those same students, and a good measure of how much they liked the class (Dwyer et al., 2004). Broeckelman-Post and Pyle (2017) found that students who completed a public speaking course (regardless of course format) experienced an increase in connected classroom climate.

**Teacher Communication and Behaviors**

Instructional format and instructional environment are only two important considerations. The second set of factors that predict instructional outcomes were teacher communication and behaviors. Since 1978, when Hurt and colleagues first published a book that focused on classroom communication, scholars have explored the impact of various teacher behaviors on students’ classroom experience and concluded that instructor communication and behaviors are highly influential to student learning and
success (Mazer & Graham, 2015). Ledbeter and Finn (2018) asserted that teacher communication behaviors influence learner empowerment and are central to students’ success. Indeed, much of the early instructional research focused on individual differences among students and subsequent research focused on how teachers approach communication in the classroom (Mottet et al., 2006).

Teacher credibility is conceptualized by Teven and McCroskey (1997) as comprised of three dimensions: competence, trustworthiness, and caring and contributes to an increase in students’ intent to persist in college (Schrodt & Finn, 2011; Witt et al., 2014). Indeed, McCroskey et al. (2004) positioned instructor credibility as the primary student perception that ultimately impacts learning outcomes. Communication research consistently confirmed that teacher credibility and teacher clarity foster the student–teacher relationship and have a positive effect on student affect and learning (Schrodt et al., 2009).

Caring has been conceptualized as encompassing empathy, understanding, and responsiveness (McCroskey, 1992; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). This means that instructors appreciate students’ perspective, have insight into what students are feeling, and are attentive to their needs. Research reveals that instructors who are caring will be perceived positively by their students, and students will evaluate the course more favorably, and also report that more affective and cognitive learning occurred (Teven & McCroskey, 1997).

The last teacher communication and behavioral practice to consider is teacher clarity. Clarity is an adaptive process whereby teachers assure that students understand course content by using feedback loops such as questions and assessment opportunities and adjust communication to meet student needs (Civikly, 1992). Teacher clarity enhances students’ ability to organize and maintain information which facilitates their learning. Clarity occurs when students deeply process information (Bolkan, 2016; Bolkan & Goodboy, 2019).

Recent research (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2020) further illustrated the clarity and learning connection and concluded that student learning was increased when they were presented abstract definitions before concrete examples. Order does matter. They reasoned that the abstract information limited the burden of cognitive overload, and this facilitated students’ understanding thereby paving the way for concrete examples. In an extensive meta-analysis, Titsworth et al. (2015) concluded that teacher clarity produces greater student learning because meaning occurs when students “receive information, can integrate new information into existing schema, and can then activate appropriate schema to accomplish tasks” (p. 387).

**Student Characteristics**

The third set of factors to predict instructional outcomes were student characteristics. Kearney and Beatty (1994) encouraged scholars “to examine students as active communicators in the teacher-student classroom exchange and to focus on students’ communication behaviors” (p. 12). Specifically, student characteristics such as student engagement and communication apprehension are critical to cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to progress in college. Indeed, Weber et al. (2011) noted a plethora of studies that bore out the positive relationship between student characteristics and learning outcomes; evidence that researchers heeded Kearney and Beatty’s (1994) earlier call.

Academic engagement time is considered a good predictor of learning (Frymier & Houser, 1999). Engaged students prepare for class ahead of time, listen during class, and participate in class discussions. Mazer (2012) identified specific behaviors that included oral and silent behaviors, as well as behaviors...
indicative of student engagement inside and outside the classroom. Specifically, interested students who spent the most time engaged in attending or interacting with course materials and others in the classroom environment experienced the highest levels of academic achievement (Mazer, 2012).

Another relevant student characteristic is communication apprehension, defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). Communication apprehension impacts student success in the classroom (Bourhis et al., 2006), self and other perceived competence (Rubin et al., 1997), and persistence and dropout rates (McCroskey et al., 1989). High communication apprehensive students skip class more often and are lower achievers (Byrne et al., 2012). Bourhis and Allen (1992) conducted a meta-analysis and concluded that there is a significant negative association between communication apprehension and cognitive performance which negatively impacts the learning process.

**Instructional Outcomes**

The fourth set of factors includes several instructional outcomes such as cognitive learning, student satisfaction, and intent to persist in college. Cognitive learning emphasizes students’ abilities to make sense of and master course concepts and content. In the words of McCroskey and colleagues (2004), “The primary outcomes of instructional communication are concerned with learning” (p. 199). Airasian and colleagues (2001) further distinguished between various phases of learning where students begin by mastering course content through the retention of information, progress to analyzing and synthesizing information, and reach a stage that includes critical evaluation. Students’ progress beyond simple recall and retention of material to higher levels of learning to analyze, synthesize, and critically evaluate course information. Students who learn more will be able to recall information, apply that information to practical situations, and create connections among course content and materials. Frisby et al. (2014) conceptualized cognitive learning as emphasizing Bloom et al’s (1956) educational objectives, which reflect recall, knowledge, understanding, and development of skills.

Communication satisfaction, the second instructional outcome, was conceptualized by Goodboy et al. (2009) as reflective of satisfaction with instrumental versus relational aspects of students’ affective response to communication with an instructor over the course of the term. “Student communication satisfaction with an instructor is linked with student retention and . . . therefore, represents a positive educational outcome” (Sidelinger et al., 2016, p. 575). Furthermore, researchers determined that student communication satisfaction with teachers is related to student motivation, learning, interest, and student communication behaviors such as out-of-class communication, instructor motives for communicating, and instructor communication behavior (Goodboy et al., 2009). Earlier Jones (2008) reported similar findings and determined that students reported the most communication satisfaction and motivation to learn with highly supportive instructors.

Teacher behaviors are powerful predictors of cognitive learning, student satisfaction, and intent to persist in college (Witt et al., 2014). Research reveals that students will likely persist in college if there is “positive contact with faculty and meaningful engagement in student activities” (Witt et al., 2014, p. 333). Without question, students’ out-of-class contact with instructors is central to retention and academic performance (Sidelinger et al., 2016). Instruction inside and outside the classroom matters and “skillful communication is one of the keys to helping students sustain positive attitudes toward persistence in academic programs” (Witt et al., 2014, p. 346).
In our first study we considered the impact of the instructional format (intact, hybrid) in regard to the classroom climate, student characteristics, and perceived teacher communication and behavior on students’ perceived cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to persist in college. Therefore, the following research questions were posed:

**RQ1:** What are the similarities and differences between intact and hybrid courses in instructional environment, student characteristics, perceived teacher communication and behaviors, and instructional outcomes?

**RQ2:** What factors predict students’ perceived (a) cognitive learning, (b) communication satisfaction, and (c) intent to persist in college by course delivery format (i.e., intact vs. hybrid)?

### Study 1—Methods

#### Participants and Procedures

For Study 1, an online survey was conducted in November 2019 (pre-COVID-19 pandemic) to examine similarities and differences between intact and hybrid courses and predictors of instructional outcomes. Participants were recruited from the introductory basic communication course at two large Midwestern public universities. To ensure data quality, attention-check questions were used in this study. Those who did not pass the attention-check questions were automatically guided to the end of the survey and their responses were discarded.

Overall, 379 participants successfully completed the survey. Among the participants, 155 (40.9%) were from intact (F2F) courses and 224 (59.1%) were from hybrid courses. In addition, 60.4% (n = 229) were female and 39.6% (n = 150) were male, ranging from 18 to 34 years old with a mean age of 19.08 (SD = 2.04). More than half (65.7%, n = 249) were first-year students and 83.6% of the participants (n = 317) reported they were White or Caucasian.

#### Measurements

Dwyer et al.’s (2004) Connected Classroom Climate Scale measured instructional environment. Participants rated each of the 18 statements (e.g., the students in my class show interest in what one another is saying) on a 5-point Likert scale. The responses were summed and averaged to create the measure *connected classroom climate* (α = .939; M = 4.00; SD = .53).

Mazer’s (2012) Student Engagement Scale asked participants to rate three items that represented four types of behaviors on a 5-point Likert-type scale: *oral in-class behaviors* (e.g., participated during class discussions; α = .843; M = 3.85; SD = .85), *silent in-class behaviors* (e.g., listened attentively to the instructor during class; α = .776; M = 4.31; SD = .51), *out-of-class behaviors* (e.g., studied for a test or quiz; α = .743; M = 3.29; SD = .74), and *thinking about course content* (e.g., thought about how the course material related to my life; α = .881; M = 3.78; SD = .82).

*Communication apprehension* was measured with the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension Scale (PRCA-24; see McCroskey et al.’s, 1985 measure). Participants rated six statements that addressed fear or anxiety in various situations on a 5-point Likert scale (α = .859; M = 2.77; SD = .84).
Teacher competence and teacher caring were measured using McCroskey and Teven’s (1999) six semantic differential items that measured instructor competence on a 5-point scale in which participants rated (e.g., expert–inexpert) and six items that measured caring (e.g., concerned about me–not concerned about me). Indices of teacher competence ($\alpha = .949; M = 4.48; SD = .77$), and teacher caring ($\alpha = .956; M = 4.27; SD = .98$) were created respectively and used in the subsequent analyses.

Teacher clarity was measured with the Clarity Behaviors Inventory (Titsworth et al., 2004). Participants rated 12 statements that measure teacher’s written and oral clarity (e.g., the teacher explains how we are supposed to see relationships between topics covered in the lecture) on a 5-point Likert scale. The responses were summed and averaged to create the measure of teacher clarity ($\alpha = .945; M = 4.06; SD = .76$).

Three instructional outcomes were measured: perceived cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to persist in college. Cognitive learning was assessed with the Cognitive Learning Measure (Frisby et al., 2014). Participants were asked to rate 10 statements on a 5-point Likert scale (e.g., I can see clear changes in my understanding of this topic). The responses were summed and averaged to create the measure cognitive learning ($\alpha = .859; M = 3.93; SD = .64$).

Student communication satisfaction was measured using Goodboy and colleagues’ (2009) Student Communication Satisfaction Scale. Participants rated each of the eight Likert-based statements to reflect their satisfaction with their communication with their instructor (e.g., I usually feel positive about my conversations with my teacher; $\alpha = .946; M = 3.95; SD = .84$).

Intent to persist in college (V. E. Wheeless et al., 2011) was measured on a 5-point semantic differential scale on four items (e.g., give up/keep going) to indicate the degree to which their instructor influenced their intent to persist in college. The mean of these items operationally defined intent to persist in college ($\alpha = .981; M = 4.49; SD = .80$).

**Results**

RQ1 asked if there were differences between intact and hybrid courses across all instructional predictors and outcomes. Independent $t$-test results failed to reveal any significant differences for all 12 variables measured in this study. Specifically, intact and hybrid formats were not different in instructional outcomes (cognitive learning: $t = -.64, p = .52$; communication satisfaction: $t = -.87, p = .39$; intent to persist: $t = -.22, p = .82$); instructional environment (connected classroom climate: $t = -.43, p = .67$); student characteristics (communication apprehension: $t = 1.24, p = .22$; silent in-class behaviors: $t = .27, p = .79$; oral in-class behaviors: $t = -.51, p = .61$; out-of-class behaviors: $t = -.14, p = .89$; thinking about course content: $t = .16, p = .87$); and perceived teacher communication and behaviors (teacher competence: $t = -.12, p = .91$; teacher caring: $t = .10, p = .92$; teacher clarity: $t = .10, p = .92$). Results indicated that contrary to conventional thinking, there may be more similarities (than differences) in instructional outcomes, as well as student and teacher communication across different delivery formats (intact and hybrid).
TABLE 1
Similarities and Differences Between Intact and Hybrid Course Formats (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Intact</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instructional Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive learning</td>
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<td>.63</td>
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<td>.66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication satisfaction</td>
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<td>.88</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>.82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persist in college</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected classroom climate</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>4.01</td>
<td>.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication apprehension</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>.87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral in-class behaviors</td>
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<td>.88</td>
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<td>.82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Silent in-class behaviors</td>
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<td>.50</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Out-of-class behaviors</td>
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<td>.74</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thinking about course content</td>
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<td>.83</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>.82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Characteristics</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher competence</td>
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<td>.71</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>.82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher caring</td>
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<td>.92</td>
<td>4.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher clarity</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 379 (155 intact mode; 224 hybrid mode)

RQ2 asked which factors predicted instructional outcomes. Multiple linear regression analyses were calculated to predict perceived cognitive learning for students from intact and hybrid courses, respectively. For the intact classes, a significant regression equation was found ($F = 15.11, p < .001$) with an $R^2$ of .484 (adjusted $R^2 = .452$). Table 2 provides a summary of the regression analyses for students’ perceived cognitive learning by course format with standardized regression coefficients. Specifically, the analysis indicated that three factors significantly predicted perceived cognitive learning for students from intact classes. Teacher clarity was the strongest predictor, followed by teacher competence, and student thinking about course content. For students enrolled in hybrid courses, three factors significantly predicted their perceived cognitive learning. Thinking about course content was the strongest predictor, followed by their silent in-class behaviors, and teacher clarity. The regression equation was significant ($F = 23.57, p < .001$) with an $R^2$ of .498 (adjusted $R^2 = .477$).
TABLE 2
Predictors of Perceived Cognitive Learning by Intact and Hybrid Courses (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Intact</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected classroom climate</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication apprehension</td>
<td>−.041</td>
<td>−.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral in-class behaviors</td>
<td>−.093</td>
<td>−.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent in-class behaviors</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>.222***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-class behaviors</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about course content</td>
<td>.198*</td>
<td>.264***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher competence</td>
<td>.271**</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher caring</td>
<td>−.063</td>
<td>.171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher clarity</td>
<td>.371***</td>
<td>.186**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final $R^2$</td>
<td>.484</td>
<td>.498</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***$p \leq .001$; **$p \leq .01$; *$p \leq .05$

In reference to communication satisfaction, three factors significantly predicted communication satisfaction for students in *intact* courses. Teacher caring was the strongest predictor, followed by teacher clarity, and students’ silent in-class behaviors. Together, a significant regression equation was found ($F = 42.01, p < .001$) with an $R^2$ of .723 (adjusted $R^2 = .706$; see Table 3). For students enrolled in *hybrid* courses, five factors significantly predicted their communication satisfaction, including teacher caring, teacher clarity, connected classroom climate, thinking about course content, and their silent in-class behaviors. The regression equation was significant ($F = 41.81, p < .001$) with an $R^2$ of .637 (adjusted $R^2 = .622$).

TABLE 3
Predictors of Communication Satisfaction by Intact and Hybrid Courses (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Intact</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected classroom climate</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>.157**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication apprehension</td>
<td>−.019</td>
<td>.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral in-class behaviors</td>
<td>.078</td>
<td>−.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent in-class behaviors</td>
<td>.113*</td>
<td>.118*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-class behaviors</td>
<td>.067</td>
<td>−.039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about course content</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.119*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher competence</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher caring</td>
<td>.552***</td>
<td>.371***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher clarity</td>
<td>.143*</td>
<td>.297***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final $R^2$</td>
<td>.723</td>
<td>.637</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***$p \leq .001$; **$p \leq .01$; *$p \leq .05$
Finally, for students enrolled in intact courses, two factors significantly predicted their intent to persist in college: silent in-class behaviors and teacher competence (.462, adjusted $R^2 = .429$; see Table 4). On the other hand, three factors predicted intent to persist in college for students in hybrid courses. Teacher clarity was the strongest predictor, followed by teacher competence, and teacher caring. This regression equation was significant as well ($F = 19.20, p < .001$) with an $R^2$ of (adjusted $R^2 = .423$).

### TABLE 4
Predictors of Intent to Persist in College by Intact and Hybrid Courses (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Intact</th>
<th>Hybrid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected classroom climate</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication apprehension</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral in-class behaviors</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>-.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent in-class behaviors</td>
<td>.273***</td>
<td>-.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-class behaviors</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about course content</td>
<td>.112</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher competence</td>
<td>.225**</td>
<td>.267**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher caring</td>
<td>.124</td>
<td>.265**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher clarity</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>.209**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final R²</strong></td>
<td>.462</td>
<td>.447</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$}

### Study 2

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the course delivery methods of academic courses across the country. By necessity, this global health crisis marshalled in different delivery formats for the basic communication course and instructors were immediately compelled to adapt to virtual instructional models (Morreale et al., 2021). In our case, the pandemic required faculty to employ remote and online learning formats.

In view of these instructional circumstances, we wondered if the required move to online and remote learning would, in the words of Roy Schwartzman (2021), creator of the popular social media site Pandemic Pedagogy, produce not a mere interruption but rather a “transformation of what communication instruction is and how it operates” (p. 18). A special issue of Communication Education dedicated to instruction and pandemic pedagogy featured Miller et al.’s (2020) call for researchers to: “. . . conduct replication studies to examine how communication functions related to previously studied communication-related concerns (e.g., classroom climate, clarity, communication apprehension, student motivation, student engagement, diversity, immediacy, and credibility) and affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning outcomes” (p. 203). Their sentiments foreshadowed our own as we contemplated the effect that COVID-19 would have on instructional communication formats, classroom environments, communication practices, and outcomes.
Study 2 was conducted during a major disruption in how we traditionally teach and learn and commenced two semesters after the pandemic that started in 2020 began (Study 2 began in April 2021). In Study 2, traditional course formats (intact and hybrid) were replaced with remote and online learning formats due to the presence of the COVID–19 pandemic. The remote courses featured a combination of synchronous and asynchronous course formats whereas the online courses were entirely asynchronous.

With these goals in mind, we proceeded to examine the impact of the instructional format, classroom climate, student characteristics, and perceived teacher communication and behaviors in regard to students’ cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and students’ intent to persist in college in the midst of a global pandemic. Thus, we posed the following research questions for Study 2:

**RQ3:** What are the similarities and differences between remote and online courses in instructional environment, student characteristics, perceived teacher communication and behaviors, and instructional outcomes?

**RQ4:** What factors predict students’ perceived (a) cognitive learning, (b) communication satisfaction, and (c) intent to persist in college by course delivery format (i.e., remote vs. online)?

### Method

#### Participants and Procedures

Study 2 participants were recruited in April 2021 (during the COVID-19 pandemic) from the introductory basic communication course at the same two large Midwestern public universities identified in Study 1. Participants were either enrolled in a remote instructional format (a combination of synchronous and asynchronous teaching) or an online format (asynchronous).

Overall, 335 participants completed the survey and passed the attention check. Among the participants, 216 (64.5%) were from remote courses and 119 (35.5%) from fully online courses. Less than half (42.36%) of the participants had taken an online college course before the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, 57.9% ($n = 194$) were female and 42.1% ($n = 141$) were male, ranging from 18 to 60 years old with a mean age of 19.69 ($SD = 4.16$). More than half (56.1%, $n = 188$) were first-year students and 78.5% of the participants ($n = 263$) reported they were White or Caucasian. The demographic data in Study 1 and 2 were quite similar.

#### Measurements

Study 2 measured some of the same variables as indicated in Study 1 (see Study 1 for a description of these measures), including instructional outcomes, cognitive learning ($\alpha = .873$; $M = 3.87$; $SD = .59$), student communication satisfaction ($\alpha = .932$; $M = 3.94$; $SD = .76$), and intent to persist in college ($\alpha = .982$; $M = 4.23$; $SD = .92$); connected classroom climate ($\alpha = .924$; $M = 3.53$; $SD = .57$); student characteristics, including communication apprehension ($\alpha = .866$; $M = 3.32$; $SD = .84$); and engagement factors, including oral in-class behaviors ($\alpha = .827$; $M = 3.88$; $SD = .93$), silent in-class behaviors ($\alpha = .889$; $M = 4.00$; $SD = .76$), out-of-class behaviors ($\alpha = .765$; $M = 3.25$; $SD = .86$), and thinking about course content ($\alpha = .860$; $M = 3.92$; $SD = .77$); as well as perceived teacher communication and behaviors, including teacher competence ($\alpha = .937$; $M = 4.48$; $SD = .68$), clarity ($\alpha = .937$; $M = 3.90$; $SD = .72$), and caring ($\alpha = .916$; $M = 4.27$; $SD = .82$).
In addition to the variables measured in Study 1, Study 2 also measured participants’ personal risk concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic. Referencing Yang et al. (2014), respondents were asked to indicate their concern about the impact of the pandemic on themselves and their families respectively, on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all concerned to 5 = extremely concerned). The mean of these two items operationally defined personal concern about the pandemic ($r = .551; M = 3.43; SD = 1.15$). Moreover, respondents were asked to report whether they were experiencing any of the following living situations during the pandemic, such as having children in the home under the age of 18; seniors who are 65 years old or older; and people with medical conditions (e.g., immune-compromised) living in their home (0 = No, 1 = Yes). An index of pandemic situations was created by summing the scores, ranging from 0 to 3 ($M = .93, SD = .80$).

Furthermore, Schwartzman (2020), noted the disparities students experienced in technology access and skill, two highly salient aspects of success in remote and online learning. To recognize the possible influence of students’ receptiveness to technology, we measured informational reception apprehension with technology (IRAT-IT) (Wheeless et al., 2005). Participants were asked to rate each of the 24 statements on a 5-point Likert scale. The mean of these items operationally defined IRAT-IT ($\alpha = .912; M = 2.68; SD = .59$).

**Results**

To answer RQ3, the independent $t$-tests indicated there were no significant differences between remote and fully online courses across all the variables measured in this study. Consistent with the results of Study 1, students in remote and online courses exhibited similarities in instructional outcomes (cognitive learning: $t = .20, p = .84$; communication satisfaction: $t = .17, p = .87$; intent to persist in college: $t = 1.27, p = .21$; see Table 5); instructional environment (connected classroom: $t = 1.46, p = .15$); student characteristics (communication apprehension: $t = .37, p = .72$; silent in-class behaviors: $t = 1.45, p = .15$; oral in-class behaviors: $t = –.19, p = .85$; out-of-class behaviors $t = –.06, p = .95$; thinking about course content: $t = –.32, p = .75$; perceived teacher communication and behaviors (teacher competence, $t = 1.57, p = .12$; teacher caring: $t = .44, p = .66$; teacher clarity $t = –.10, p = .92$; and IRAT: $t = .33, p = .87$).

RQ4 asked which factors predicted instructional outcomes for remote and online courses, respectively. Multiple linear regression analyses were calculated to predict perceived cognitive learning for students in remote courses and fully online courses, respectively. For the remote courses, a significant regression equation was found ($F = 18.74, p < .001$) with an $R^2$ of .526 (adjusted $R^2 = .497$). Specifically, three factors significantly predicted cognitive learning for students in remote courses. Thinking about course content was the strongest predictor, followed by teacher caring, and teacher clarity. Table 6 provides a summary of the regression analyses for students’ perceived cognitive learning by course format with standardized regression coefficients. For students enrolled in online courses, two factors significantly predicted their perceived cognitive learning, including teacher caring and communication apprehension (which was a negative predictor). The regression equation was significant ($F = 10.005, p < .001$) with an $R^2$ of .532 (adjusted $R^2 = .479$).
### TABLE 5
Similarities and Differences Between Remote and Online Formats (Study 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Remote</th>
<th></th>
<th>Fully Online</th>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Outcomes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive learning</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication satisfaction</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persist in college</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected classroom climate</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication apprehension</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral in-class behaviors</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent in-class behaviors</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-class behaviors</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about course content</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRAT</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher competence</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher caring</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher clarity</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 335 (216 remote instruction format; 119 fully online format)

### TABLE 6
Predictors of Perceived Cognitive Learning by Remote and Online Courses (Study 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Remote</th>
<th>Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COVID Impact</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal concern about the pandemic</td>
<td>−.033</td>
<td>.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pandemic situations</td>
<td>−.047</td>
<td>.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected classroom climate</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>−.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication apprehension</td>
<td>−.047</td>
<td>.162*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral in-class behaviors</td>
<td>−.056</td>
<td>.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent in-class behaviors</td>
<td>−.003</td>
<td>.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-class behaviors</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about course content</td>
<td>.364***</td>
<td>.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRAT-IT</td>
<td>−.011</td>
<td>−.119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher competence</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher caring</td>
<td>.313***</td>
<td>.326**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher clarity</td>
<td>.221***</td>
<td>.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final R²</strong></td>
<td>.526</td>
<td>.532</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p ≤ .001; **p ≤ .01; *p ≤ .05
In terms of communication satisfaction, for the *remote* courses, a significant regression equation was found \((F = 26.88, p < .001)\) with an \(R^2\) of .614 (adjusted \(R^2\) = .591; see Table 7). Two factors significantly predicted communication satisfaction for students in *remote* courses, including teacher caring and teacher clarity. For the *online* courses, a significant regression equation was also found \((F = 21.97, p < .001)\) with an \(R^2\) of .713 (adjusted \(R^2\) = .681). Two factors significantly predicted communication satisfaction for students in an online course. Similar to remote courses, teacher caring was the strongest predictor of communication satisfaction for students enrolled in online courses, followed by teacher clarity.

**TABLE 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors of Communication Satisfaction by Remote and Online Courses (Study 2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predictors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal concern about the pandemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pandemic situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected classroom climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication apprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral in-class behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent in-class behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-class behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about course content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRAT-IT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final (R^2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[***p \leq .001; **p \leq .01; *p \leq .05\]

Regarding intent to persist in college, a significant regression equation was found for students enrolled in *remote* courses \((F = 9.23, p < .001)\) with an \(R^2\) of .353 (adjusted \(R^2\) = .315) (see Table 8). Three factors significantly predicted their intent to persist in college. Teacher caring was, again, the strongest predictor, followed by teacher competence, and students’ thinking about course content. On the other hand, four factors predicted intent to persist in college for students in *online* courses. Silent in-class behavior was the strongest predictor, followed by teacher caring, oral in-class behaviors (which was a negative predictor), and out-of-class behaviors. The regression equation was significant \((F = 7.89, p < .001)\) with an \(R^2\) of .472 (adjusted \(R^2\) = .412).
### Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Remote</th>
<th>Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COVID Impact</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal concern about the pandemic</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pandemic situations</td>
<td>−.032</td>
<td>−.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructional Environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected classroom climate</td>
<td>−.002</td>
<td>.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication apprehension</td>
<td>−.105</td>
<td>−.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral in-class behaviors</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>−.258*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent in-class behaviors</td>
<td>−.073</td>
<td>.349**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-class behaviors</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>.234*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about course content</td>
<td>.160*</td>
<td>.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRAT-IT</td>
<td>.029</td>
<td>−.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher competence</td>
<td>.195**</td>
<td>.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher caring</td>
<td>.324***</td>
<td>.306**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher clarity</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final R²</strong></td>
<td>.353</td>
<td>.451***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p ≤ .001; **p ≤ .01; *p ≤ .05

Consistent with the results of Study 1, students in remote and online courses exhibited similarities in instructional outcomes (cognitive learning: $t = .20, p = .84$; communication satisfaction: $t = .17, p = .87$; intent to persist in college: $t = 1.27, p = .21$; see Table 5); instructional environment (connected classroom: $t = 1.46, p = .15$); student characteristics (communication apprehension: $t = .37, p = .72$; silent in-class behaviors: $t = 1.45, p = .15$; oral in-class behaviors: $t = −.19, p = .85$; out-of-class behaviors $t = −.06, p = .95$; thinking about course content: $t = −.32, p = .75$; IRAT: $t = .33, p = .87$; pandemic situations: $t = 1.03, p = .31$); perceived teacher communication and behaviors (teacher competence, $t = 1.57, p = .12$; teacher caring: $t = .44, p = .66$; and teacher clarity $t = −.10, p = .92$). The only significant difference found between students in remote and online courses was their personal concern about the pandemic ($t = −2.22, p = .027$). Students enrolled in an online course were more concerned about the pandemic impact compared to those in a remote course.

### Discussion

Considering challenges as opportunities for growth is one of the peculiar benefits of a crisis. This research investigated the explanatory power of instructional formats, classroom environment, student characteristics, and perceived teacher communication and behaviors to predict students’ cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to persist in college in pre-pandemic circumstances and during the pandemic. There are five takeaways from this research. First, and most importantly, we did not find statistically significant differences in instructional outcomes across various course formats. More specifically, we did not detect differences between intact and hybrid and remote and online course formats.
formats across all variables measured in this study. Our research illustrates that desired instructional outcomes can be attained regardless of course formats. As Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) suggested, “There is no one-size-fits-all pedagogy for online learning” (p. 133). Perhaps this generation, the true digital natives (Generation Z), are far more adaptive and flexible and, conceivably, we seem to have reached the point in which, in the words of Fassett and Attay (2022), “no learning . . . must occur entirely in a single modality” (p. 147). Armed with this knowledge, instructors should recognize the relative strengths of the formats to enhance student engagement and learning.

Second, prior to the change in teaching formats (pre-pandemic) and across delivery formats (intact and hybrid), teacher clarity was the dominant predictor of students' cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and students' intent to persist in college. In Study 2 (during the pandemic), teacher caring was the prevalent indicator of cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and students' intent to persist in college across delivery modes (remote and online). Teacher communication and behaviors such as clarity and caring are impactful and appear to play a central role in students' academic successes.

For intact and hybrid courses (Study 1), teacher clarity and student engagement (thinking about course content and silent in-class behavior) assisted students as they cognitively processed, stored, and retrieved information. Regardless of course format, teacher clarity also predicted students' communication satisfaction which is the result of clear interaction between a student and teacher (Goodboy et al., 2009). From the students' perspective, communication satisfaction suggests that they have achieved their goals for satisfactorily interacting with their course instructor.

Student persistence was the result of teacher clarity as well as teacher competence and caring. These findings are consistent with previous research that confirmed that teacher competence has a direct and indirect effect on student persistence (V. E. Wheeless et al., 2011; Witt et al., 2014). Furthermore, having more satisfying interactions with faculty enhances students' persistence to finish college (Tinto, 2012; Witt et al., 2014).

The third important takeaway is that students' engagement in their coursework appears to be highly critical to student success. Our research findings are consistent with Mazer's (2012) claim that student engagement is one of the best predictors of learning. Specifically, we found that thinking about course content and silent in-class behaviors predicted instructional outcomes in pre-pandemic and pandemic times. When students think about course content and engage in silent in-class behavior, they are involved in the learning process in a profound way. Scale items associated with thinking about course content suggested that students experiencing higher levels of cognitive learning were dedicated to understanding the course materials. They considered how the course information might be utilized in their everyday lives and how it might be useful in their future careers. A high level of engagement signals students' willingness to participate in the learning process. It is clear that students are a driving force in their own cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to persist in college.

The fourth takeaway, reflective of Study 2, for remote courses, three factors significantly predicted students' cognitive learning and included thinking about course content, teacher caring, and teacher clarity. Conversely, for online courses, teacher caring positively and student communication apprehension negatively predicted cognitive learning. These findings are consistent with previous research that students' communication apprehension interferes with cognitive learning (Byrne et al., 2012).
Teacher caring and teacher clarity were the only significant predictors of communication satisfaction during the pandemic. These results confirmed that students’ communication satisfaction with their instructors is critical to the development of the teacher–student relationship. Teaching and learning are relational events. “Put simply, the more students are academically and socially engaged with academic staff, and peers . . . the more likely they are to succeed in the classroom” (Tinto, 2012, p. 5).

For remote course formats, three factors (teacher caring, teacher competence, and thinking about course content) predicted students’ intent to persist in college. Regardless of course format (online or remote), two factors significantly predicted students’ intent to persist in college including the stronger predictor, students’ silent in-class behaviors and teacher competence. Surprisingly, in online courses (Study 2), oral in-class behavior was a significant negative predictor of students’ intent to persist in college. In other words, students who participate and freely share their thoughts and opinions with their classmates might be less likely to persist through college. It could be that unlike talking, listening attentively to the lecture and classmates’ contributions, and thinking about the course content contributes more meaningfully to persistence toward earning a degree than does a process of sharing thoughts and opinions.

The fifth meaningful takeaway (see Study 2) revealed that the caring factor is a consistent presence for those in the midst of the pandemic. Students experienced problems with internet access, broadband strength, the absence of a quiet place to work without interruption, increased workload, and in some cases anxiety and uncertainty, and the presence of young children and/or siblings quarantined at home (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Schwartzman, 2020). Students were thrust into a new learning environment with little or no preparation or notice. Contributing to this unease, some students felt a lack of preparedness to meet these new challenges. Students are not equally advantaged, and some do not necessarily have the tools, technical ability, or access to an adequate setting necessary to succeed in an online environment (Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2020).

Even before the pandemic, students were struggling with unprecedented anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Sellnow et al., 2022). The pandemic exacerbated these feelings and compelled teachers to provide students support in unparalleled ways. To navigate these troubling times, Sellnow et al. suggested that instructors practice an ethic of care, a theory developed by Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, 1982). Applied to the classroom, this translates into “honoring the burden of a student’s lived experience while providing opportunities for them to accomplish rigorous course expectations amid life challenges” (p. 158). To achieve this Sellnow and colleagues (2022) proposed that instructors develop authentic assignments, engage in dialogue that honors students’ experiences, and remind them of their inherent worth. Students can still be held to course standards “while [instructors continue] providing opportunities for them to accomplish rigorous course expectations amid life challenges” (p. 159).

Anecdotal information revealed that it was commonplace for faculty to make accommodations for students to ensure their academic survival and success. Faculty members extended themselves selflessly to students in unexpected ways. Teachers were taking more time to listen to student concerns (i.e., caring) and focused on increased messaging (i.e., clarity). Kaufmann and Vallade (2022) advised that enhanced student–teacher communication and connection, the presence of engaged and caring teachers, and clear and organized teaching materials be the standard. It is clear that when faculty extend themselves empathically, students thrive academically and personally. Learning depends on both delivery and content. Thus, it is imperative that we determine the best combination of instructional practices and
pedagogy, as well as student training in various teaching platforms to ensure future student growth and development, long after crises end.

A recent survey concluded that the faculty role expanded during the pandemic to include concern for students’ emotional health and well-being. Interim co-director of NSSE, Jillian Kinzie, indicated that “faculty acted as a ‘lifeline’ for students” because of their unwavering commitment to students (Kleinmann, 2022). Interestingly, caring was less of a prominent predictor in Study 1 as it was in Study 2. This may be explained by the fact that Study 1 data was collected pre-pandemic while Study 2 was conducted during the pandemic. In sum, our data indicated that during the pandemic, students who experienced increased caring from instructors fared better than they would have in the absence of teachers’ support. These and other conclusions require additional study. If and when campus life returns to some semblance of normal, the lessons learned from this set of studies could improve student outcomes.

**Limitations and Conclusion**

While this study provided important insights into understanding how course format, instructional environments, student characteristics, and perceived teacher communication and behaviors predicted instructional outcomes, the results should be viewed in context and with caution. Due to the cross-sectional design of the research, this study did not aim to claim any causal inferences. In addition, self-reported data using a nonprobability sample may have introduced a social desirability bias. Future research should supplement the survey data with behavioral log data or observation and use a longitudinal design. Moreover, this study only examined perceived teacher communication and behavior. Future research is needed to pinpoint teacher behaviors and communication that might impact instructional outcomes across different course formats.

The authors believe that this paragraph is not necessary and doesn’t add to our understanding of the topic. We also note the disproportionate number of freshmen in Study 1 (65.7%) as well as in Study 2 (56.1%). While it may be that this demographic influenced the results of these studies, it seemed rather unlikely to the researchers because the average age of the students for both studies (Study 1, 19.08 y.o. with $SD = 2.04$; Study 2, 19.69 y.o. with $SD = 4.16$) suggests that they probably all had 12 recent years of pre-college schooling that provided them a rather strong homogenous background in learning environments and formats among themselves.

This study was based on the belief that instructors’ and students’ communication influences cognitive learning, communication satisfaction, and intent to persist in college. Our findings empirically support these beliefs. Future researchers should confirm these relationships and outcomes to determine whether the changes in the instructional format (in the instance of the two present studies) may have produced anomalous results or perhaps these findings provide a step toward a better understanding of student success in the classroom.
References


TABLE 9
Correlations for Study 1 Variables

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*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.
## TABLE 10
Correlations for Study 2 Variables

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*p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01. ***p ≤ .001.
Engaging Pre-Med Students in Field-Related Dialogue: Best Practices for a Dialogic Approach to a Health-Specific Oral Communication Course

Natalie C. Grecu

Keywords: oral communication, public speaking, dialogic communication, pre-med communication, health communication, nonverbal communication, small group communication

Abstract: Using a dialogic framework as the backdrop to course curriculum, I developed an Oral Communication course for pre-med students with the goal to enhance students’ public speaking skills while also incorporating health communication and applied communication research and activities to create opportunities for engagement. I propose best practices for teaching pre-med oral communication by deconstructing “bedside manner,” emphasizing a dialogic, audience-centered approach to communication, illustrating the praxis of genuine communication, creating a supportive climate through nonverbal and small group communication tenets, and creating a space to practice genuine communication. Using this approach, the layperson understanding of “bedside manner” becomes an intersection of these areas to better understand the complexities of physician-patient communication.

Introduction

In partnership with a Medicine and Biosciences University (MBU), the University recently developed an accelerated undergraduate pre-med program. Students that successfully complete this program are automatically admitted into the MBU medical school. One distinct goal of this new program was to tailor general education classes to address the needs of pre-med students through specialized curriculum. Faculty teaching general education courses in this program, such as oral communication, English...
composition and literature, and modern languages were granted the freedom to create new, accelerated content and materials designed to challenge advanced pre-med students and enhance content-area knowledge to prepare them for their future pre-med courses and careers. As one of the first faculty members to teach a course for the program, I created a health-specific oral communication course that would transcend the basic tenets of oral communication.

One of the most prevalent obstacles in developing this course was dismantling preconceived notions of what constitutes communication between a patient and a physician and the conception of communication as an objective to be obtained rather than a skill to be developed. These preconceptions operate under an assumption that patient–physician communication consists primarily of “bedside manner.” Bedside manner is accomplished when doctors convey humanistic, compassionate, empathetic, and supportive care (Silverman, 2012; Weissmann et al., 2006).

My objective was to introduce communication as a complex process involving more than bedside manner skills. This is intended to reverse the trend of students losing “patient-centeredness” through increased exposure to patients during their medical training (Wilcox et al., 2017). Also, little is known about how humanistic behaviors and attitudes are being taught in clinical settings (Weissmann et al., 2006). Course learning objectives included: critically evaluating public messages using critical listening skills; identifying and developing skills to manage communication apprehension; developing skills as an ethical speaker; and demonstrating the effective use of verbal and nonverbal elements of communication.

In this essay, I first describe the dialogic framework informing the course. I then illustrate how I expanded the basic tenets of speech communication to emphasize an audience-centered approach and explicate the praxis of genuine communication. Finally, I conclude with practical applications and activity examples to improve students’ communication skills in their future careers.

**Dialogic Communication as a Framework**

To confront the bedside manner misconception, I incorporated communication curriculum that addresses issues surrounding patient rapport (e.g., listening skills, nonverbal communication, and the patient as a diagnosis rather than a person conundrum). Thus, this course focused on a patient-centered approach to oral communication aimed at mitigating negative patient–physician communication behaviors and encouraging dialogue.

The course focused on the audience-centered principles of dialogical communication as operationalized in the public relations field, which I used to address and emphasize the complicated nature of patient–physician communication. Dialogic perspectives offer an approach to ethical communication processes, as the concept of dialogue is more of a stance, orientation, or quality of the communication, rather than a particular format or method (Johannesen et al., 2008, p. 54). Dialogue as situated in public relations research bridges audience- or public-centered approaches while also embracing a dialogic model of communication. As Taylor and Kent (2014) noted, dialogue “says that organizations should engage with stakeholders and publics to make things happen, to help make better decisions, to keep citizens informed, and to strengthen organizations and society” (pp. 387–388).

This dialogical perspective emphasizes reciprocity and mutuality, as well as ethics, responsibility, and community (Keaten & Soukup, 2009, pp. 170–171). Illustrated by this mutual equality, inclusion, and
with both parties having genuine concern for one another (Botan, 1997, pp. 190–191), the dialogic communication model provides a more humanistic, communication- and relationship-centered and ethical approach to public relations (p. 196). Characteristics of a dialogical approach include authenticity, inclusion, confirmation, presentness, a spirit of mutual equality, and a supportive climate (Johannesen et al., 2008, pp. 55–56). Dialogue can mitigate power relationships through valuing individual dignity and working to involve participants in the decision-making process (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 388).

In the context of patient–physician communication, engaging multiple stakeholders involved in the process of “health care” must transcend the corporate notions of the medical industry and, rather, highlight the relationships involved in patient–physician communication (Lim & Greenwood, 2017). From a medical field perspective, Ranjan et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of communication in cultivating a dialogic relationship between themselves and patients to better understand patient issues, mitigate frustration during difficult encounters, and decrease job stress while increasing job satisfaction (p. 1).

Applying a public relations dialogic approach to this course foregrounds the communicative and relational aspects of the patient–physician dynamic. I used this dialogical approach as a method of breaking down preconceptions of bedside manner, emphasizing the importance of dialogue, and creating opportunities for supportive, genuine patient–physician interactions. I developed course materials with the overarching goal of enhancing students’ public speaking skills while also incorporating health communication and applied communication research and activities to create opportunities for engagement. I introduced dialogic-centered key concepts from nonverbal, small group, health, and oral communication studies. In doing so, I argue that effective bedside manner sits at an intersection of these areas. I propose the following best practices based on a reflexive process of implementing, reflecting on, and revising the course throughout the term. In doing so, I hope to provide a starting point for teacher–scholars to adapt oral communication courses not only for pre-med students but other disciplines as well.

**Best Practice #1: Deconstruct Bedside Manner by Applying a Dialogic Approach to Communication**

One of the course goals was to help students realize the significance of communication in a physician’s bedside manner. By approaching bedside manner from a communicative perspective, I encouraged students to reflect and think critically about the interaction to facilitate long-term learning.

I applied dialogic communication principles to provide opportunities for students to better understand the complexities of the patient–physician interaction and to better account for the mechanisms that may affect such an interaction. I organized the course readings, discussions, and activities to consider important issues such as nonverbal communication during an interaction, the use of technology, previous interactions with the patient and other key stakeholders such as office and medical staff, communication while under stress, and how their own perceptions of a patient may affect the communication occasion.

For one in-class discussion, students reflected on the significance of their perceptions. I asked students to devise a one-sentence explanation of a specific health-related quote and propose two examples of how the quote relates to their future career. To debrief this activity, I asked students to reflect on their interpretation of the quote and discuss how their own understanding of the quote compared to
their classmates’ interpretations. Because of the various backgrounds and experiences of the first-year students, interpretations were divergent, which yielded a concrete yet simplistic illustration of how our perceptions can differ greatly.

Furthermore, throughout the course, students posed questions with the expectation of finding “silver bullet” answers to potential patient–physician communication issues and scenarios. The most rewarding aspect of this class was witnessing students’ continual improvement in considering potential communication issues from multiple perspectives. As we proceeded together through the course, students began moving away from standard solution-based inquiries and toward a better understanding of the complexities of human communication.

Best Practice #2: Maintain Basic Speech Communication/Oral Communication Tenets While Emphasizing a Dialogic, Audience-Centered Approach to Communication

The overarching goal of the course was to improve the students’ public speaking skills and emphasize the praxis of dialogue. I used dialogue as an attempt to improve the critical interactions the students, as future physicians, will have with their patients.

Thus, the major course assignments were an informative speech and a persuasive speech, each of them underscoring a connection to the medical field. The goal of the informative speech was to simplify a complex medical issue or procedure and inform their audience, either layperson or expert, about a specific issue. For the persuasive speech, the objective was to consider the importance of understanding their audience and the challenges of adjusting their communication to maximize effectiveness. For each assigned speech, students were asked to consider the potential power dynamic inherent in the patient–physician relationship and adjust their communicative opportunity in the form of a speech to their audience. These assignments offered dialogic opportunities to explore students’ own understandings of why they are pursuing a career in the medical field while also enhancing their understanding and experience in engaging in dialogic communication by considering their stakeholder, or audience.

Throughout the semester, students expanded on speech communication audience-centered approaches while also attending to humanistic, compassionate, and empathetic dialogic communication processes. For example, in role-playing and discussion activities, students reflected on space and proximity by kneeling to make eye contact with what would be a child patient and changed the language in speeches to avoid jargon and show care. Finally, even the student speech topics evolved by the end of the semester to address health-related communication issues, such as “whitcoat syndrome,” a condition in which patients may be affected by nervousness and apprehension when interacting with health-care workers.

Best Practice #3: Illustrate the Praxis of Genuine Communication

Another course goal was to encourage students to consider difficult communication phenomena they may face in their future careers. In lecture, I discussed the significance of praxis and the intersection of skills, theory, and applying knowledge to emphasize a dialogic approach to the patient–physician relationship. Students also explored the praxis of genuine communication through assigned readings that discussed genuine communication in physicians’ communication styles, end-of-life communication, and the communication of hope. I assigned Mazzi et al.’s (2015) article which focused
on what people appreciate in physicians’ communication, concluding that demonstrating competency and self-confidence was highly appreciated (p. 1224) and noting that “affective communication is highly valued by nearly everybody, as long as it stays at a professional level and is perceived as genuine” (p. 1224).

I drew from hospice and cancer health communication research to examine the praxis of genuine communication for our end-of-life section of the course. For these communication discussions, research by Candrian et al. (2017) best fit the dialogic approach framework to this course because of its emphasis on stakeholder-specific perceptions and its operationalization of Street’s (2003) ecology theory of patient-centered communication which “focuses on the complex interplay between individual, relational, community, and societal influences on interactions around health” (Street, 2003, as cited in Candrian et al., 2017, p. 3). Student discussions focused on how political, social, and cultural contexts contribute to the complexities of the interaction between hospice nurses and patients and families. This emphasizes the need for future physicians to consider how hospice admission interaction is entrenched within various contexts, affecting how individuals make these decisions.

An additional topic of interest in the end-of-life curriculum is discourse surrounding “hope,” which further complicates the patient–physician communicative interaction. Communicating hope is complex, especially in the context of dealing with a terminal illness (Koening Kellas et al., 2017, p. 1). For this topic, students discussed the following questions with a classmate: What are the advantages and disadvantages of communicating hope to patients? When do you believe it is appropriate or inappropriate? What makes communicating hope to patients complex? Who might be affected by communication of hope and when? After debriefing the discussion questions as a class, we reviewed the communication of hope based on the Koening Kellas et al. (2017) article. The discussions and engagement with the praxis curriculum resources resulted in students often sharing their own experiences with physicians, including in the end-of-life context. Reflecting on students’ responses to this portion of the course, I recommend incorporating these more difficult conversations in midsemester to avoid ending on a particularly emotionally challenging topic.

**Best Practice #4: Create a Supportive Climate Through Nonverbal and Small Group Communication Tenets**

Another course goal was to incorporate nonverbal and small group concepts that help foster a supportive climate for patient–physician communication. To examine the intricacies of the patient–physician interaction, I applied nonverbal and small group communication concepts from *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (Knapp et al., 2013) and *Communication in Small Groups: Principles and Practices* (Beebe & Masterson, 2014).

Nonverbal lecture material and activities incorporated key topics such as: the importance of physicians’ nonverbal communication (Mast, 2007), GroupThink (Knapp et al., 2013), effects of technology on rapport (Booth et al., 2004), active listening and expression of emotions (Roter et al., 2006), and perceptual research (Loeb et al., 2012). Two important concepts discussed in class were active listening and expressiveness in patient–physician interactions. Active listening skills are essential to dialogic communication. These skills include “listening, empathy, being able to contextualize issues within local, national and international frameworks, [and] being able to identify common ground between parties” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 31). Another nonverbal communication issue we explored was expressiveness
in patient–physician interactions. Mast (2007) conceptualized expressiveness nonverbals as “less time reading medical chart, more forward lean, more nodding, more gestures, closer interpersonal distance, and more gazing” (p. 316).

To introduce the Booth et al. (2004) article on the effect of computer use on patient–physician rapport, students paired off to discuss the following questions: Why is interpersonal communication and listening important? How do you offer rapport with patients while spending time engaging with the computer? To practice engaging the concepts from the article, students partnered with a classmate to perform and simulate the three types of general practitioner behaviors, which include controlling, responsive/opportunistic, and ignoring. These simulations offered students an opportunity to speak in front of the classroom, while also reflecting on strategies to manage transitions between the patient and computer screen or technology. I debriefed this activity by returning to the article and its conclusion that when confronting the difficulties of multitasking during patient–physician interactions the soundest approach is to try to ensure that the physician will not be required to attend to the patient at the same time they are engaged with technology, and vice versa (Booth et al., 2004, p. 82).

**Best Practice #5: Create a Space to Practice Genuine Communication**

Another course goal was to offer students a space to apply course content through practice and engagement with their classmates. I incorporated communicative activities that nudged students beyond their comfort zones within a safe space to perform and refine these key genuine communication processes.

I found one activity to be particularly effective in emphasizing the importance of a dialogic model of communication related to nonverbal communication. Adapted from “Trainers’ Tips: Active Listening Exercises” (Norman, 2018), this activity involved active listening and allowed students the opportunity to acknowledge how often they are distracted during conversations due to internal distractions.

To begin, the class was divided into two groups, Group 1 and Group 2. The students in Group 1 went into the hallway where I asked them to think of a good story or experience that had occurred over the holiday break. Members of Group 1 partnered up with a member of Group 2 to discuss their story in the classroom. I instructed students in Group 2 to raise their hand for 5 seconds, without explaining their actions to their partner, each time they wanted to ask a question, their mind started to wander, or they were thinking of a reply. During the activity, Group 2 students were intermittingly raising their hands, creating laughter, confusion, and frustration for their partner because they could not explain why they were raising their hand.

After a period, Group 2 students were able to discuss why they were raising their hand, and Group 1 students told their stories again without the physical disruption that represents inner disruptions that interfere with active listening. Students compared the two conversations that demonstrate active listening and feeling listened to in communication. This activity was then discussed in terms of improving listening when communicating with a patient, which lead into lecture and discussion on the use of technology during a patient interaction and its effect on rapport (Booth et al., 2004), and the importance of expression of emotions during patient–physician communication (Roter et al., 2006).
Conclusion

My intent in adapting this oral communication course to focus on pre-med students was to enhance the students’ understanding of communication as it may affect their future careers and interactions with patients. One limitation of this best practices study is that it does not measure affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning objectives. Future research is needed to better understand the short-term and long-term student learning process through nuanced formative and summative assessments.

This approach demonstrates one method for tailoring a core communication course for a specific discipline. I argue that this type of cross-discipline course and curriculum has the potential for reinvigorating a core class by tailoring it to other areas of study, such as the medical fields, engineering, design, and so forth. This has the potential to encourage collaboration between university schools, departments, and colleagues to better understand communication challenges students may encounter in their professions.

Improving bedside manner is not just for students in the classroom, as it can be an important part of professional training and development in the medical field. To engage with practicing medical professionals, communication teachers and scholars can create workshops, certificates, presentations, and other opportunities to highlight the relationships involved in patient–physician communication and present practical strategies to improve the patient–physician stakeholder relationship by applying key concepts of dialogic communication theory. This could provide medical professionals an opportunity for professional development by learning, among other things, how physician expressiveness, technology use during patient visits, and nonverbal communication—such as displaying empathy—affect patient–physician rapport.

Developing accelerated content and materials designed to challenge advanced pre-med students and enhance content-area knowledge expanded upon the general education course learning objectives to better prepare them for their future pre-med courses and careers. Feedback from students revealed their appreciation for this interdisciplinary approach to the general education communication curriculum. For instance, one student stated that “we would benefit in our career paths” by taking the course, while another student expressed that the course “made it a priority that we understand how communication plays an important role in the medical field” and incorporated materials that “really grasp our attention.” This type of feedback gives me hope that using dialogue as a framework for pre-med communication courses may help these future physicians provide more effective care and result in healthier, happier patients in the long run.

References


Pursuing Inclusion and Justice While Affirming the Mental Health of Marginalized Students

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Keywords: communication education, instructional communication, diversity, minority stress, emotional labor

Abstract: This article provides best practices that instructors can use to affirm and support marginalized students’ mental health with a specific focus on students of color. Recently, campuses have witnessed renewed calls for diversity and inclusion in the wake of anti-Black violence. Advocates have called for needed structural changes. To build upon these calls for change, this article provides instructors with tools they can use in the interim to navigate questions of diversity, inclusion, and justice in the classroom. The essay centers the mental health needs of students from marginalized populations to hedge against the possibility that efforts to foster inclusion, including advocating for structural reform, contribute additional trauma to these students.

Introduction

The ongoing hardships of COVID-19, microaggressions, police brutality, and the resulting conversations around critical race theory have sparked a resurgence in university efforts to promote diversity and equity. Yet, much energy and conversation about promoting inclusion and justice only occur after traumatic events and fail to attune explicitly to the needs of marginalized students. After George Floyd’s tragic death, many universities and departments released statements affirming the significance of diversity and inclusion but failed to consider and affirm the mental health of students of color.
As educators, we must prioritize the mental health of students. College students already have a high risk for anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. The pandemic, ongoing oppression, and continuing trauma only exasperate these risks, and the number of students who report mental health challenges continues to increase (McAlpine, 2021). Educators must act to support students’ mental health, especially students who continue to face disproportionate marginalization, at times even within the classroom. When entering our classrooms, students may be navigating a recent experience with sexual violence, yet another microaggression, government officials legislating which bathroom they can use, or new trauma from yet another video of violence against people of color. Moreover, as scholars in the discipline continue to publish and assign articles in the wake of #CommunicationSoWhite (Chakravartty et al., 2018) and the Distinguished Scholars controversy (see Kynard & McCann, 2021), it remains imperative for instructors to consider how this critical work will influence students and how to teach the literature on inclusion and access in inclusive and accessible ways.

The best practices provided in this essay enable instructors to remain proactive in pursuing inclusive and just classroom spaces while simultaneously centering the needs and mental health of students from marginalized backgrounds, focusing primarily on students of color. Instructors must proactively address persistent gaps for supporting historically marginalized communities and their mental and emotional health and their “greater unmet mental health needs compared to students of privileged positionalities” (Lipson et al., 2018, p. 348). Although structural reforms at the university remain a must, this essay explores what instructors can do when structural reforms become stalled or watered down. Even when universities succeed in cultivating systematic and structural changes, such as expanding their allyship trainings programs and their mental health services, instructors still have a critical role to play in ensuring that the classroom space does not produce additional trauma for students. As such, we emphasize how instructors can cultivate more just and livable spaces in the classroom as both injustices and needed reforms continue outside of the classroom. In doing so, we extend the conversation started in *Journal of Communication Pedagogy* in its special issue on pandemic pedagogy, adding to the impressive list of recommendations provided in those articles about how instructors can assist students in navigating mental health challenges as the COVID pandemic persists.

This essay posits several potential shortcomings to current approaches to diversity, equity, and justice in higher education and provides recommendations that instructors can use in the classroom to hedge against these shortcomings. We view survival as an act of resistance, so we aim to provide recommendations to support mental health and well-being in the classroom as injustices continue around us and in our classroom spaces. As a research team, we represent a variety of identities, but we all have experiences with mental health that inform our focus on cultivating learning spaces that affirm mental health. The first author is a Black, cisgender, middle-class, queer woman who lives with anxiety and depression. The second author is a White, cisgender, straight woman who lives with generalized anxiety disorder. The third author is a White, cisgender, middle-class, gay man who lives with post-traumatic stress and depression. The first two authors were graduate students when we wrote this essay, and the third author was an assistant professor. We use our shared experiences with two courses we had together to illustrate how affirming the mental health of marginalized students might look like in practice.

Generally, when universities and public institutions aim for diversity, they center their focus on educating historically privileged, and especially White students, at the expense and comfort of these diverse communities. For example, White students typically benefit the most from efforts to promote
diversity, because diversity efforts provide them the opportunity to learn how to interact with people of
different backgrounds and cultures (Hikido & Murray, 2016). In addition to providing the most benefit
to privileged students, diversity and inclusion efforts often fail to consider the mental health needs of
marginalized students or, worse, add to the mental health challenges of these students. Marginalized
students face emotional and psychological burdens simply for living in an oppressive society that devalues
their life. Specifically, students of color must also navigate systemic racism and its daily reminders,
through the flood of imagery via news and social media depicting Black bodies in pain. Living in an
unequal society as a target population takes an emotional toll. Living with systemic racism is tiring and
exhausting (Landertinger et al., 2021). Students of color and other students on the margins face additional
stress and mental health challenges as they navigate microaggressions, harmful assumptions about their
academic skills, toxic environments, and exposure to images of violence against people who share their
identity (Cox et al., 2011, p. 118; Smith et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Continued microaggressions
put minority students in psychological, physiological, and behavioral distress, producing a wide variety
of reactions including but not limited to feelings of helplessness, and irritability, fatigue, isolation, poor
performance at work or in school, and changes in appetite (Franklin et al., 2014). Although universities
do work to address these mental health concerns, inclusive approaches to provide student support
often do so without taking the necessary considerations for the experiences of students of color and
historically marginalized groups they impact. Instead, universities and educators should attempt to
foster spaces that both recognize the need for education about diversity and take extra considerations
for how their efforts to promote diversity may uniquely influence the mental health of the marginalized
groups they seek to help.

Yet, we also echo Bettina L. Love’s (2019) call: “we want to do more than survive.” This essay provides
best practices for affirming mental health of students experiencing oppression and marginalization; the
practices will hopefully help students and faculty members survive as higher education grapples with
injustice. Yet, the best practices themselves are not sufficient to confront this injustice. Many proposals
are aimed at cultivating inclusion and just focus on larger structural changes. Structural changes matter,
and proposed structural changes include building up counselling centers by hiring therapists of color,
developing professional development opportunities for faculty of color, creating spaces to celebrate Black
life, and building relationships with high schools that have predominant student of color populations
(Landertinger et al., 2021). We also encourage active efforts to foster inclusion and justice through
allyship and bystander intervention trainings, revamping curriculum and scholarly agendas to ensure it
is responsive to the needs of diverse student bodies and addressing systems of patronage that reinforce
privilege and foster exclusion (Corrigan & Vats, 2020). Although space does not allow us to unpack
these transformative actions further, we strongly encourage people to engage with the Building the
Fugitive Academy conference’s seminars available online (Building the Fugitive Academy Organizing
Committee, n.d.).

We must note that instructors are already in the classroom and cannot wait for universities to enact
these changes. Structural changes require time, resources, and multifaceted contributions from faculty
members and campus staff to accomplish. Universities might fail to enact the structural reforms. Although
these proposals certainly matter significantly, they do not provide guidance for faculty members working
to cultivate inclusive classrooms in the interim and when universities fail to create change. Instructors
would benefit from learning tangible ways to focus on marginalized students’ well-being as larger
campus conversations about diversity and justice continue. Even when institutions succeed in creating
structural change, instructors still must learn how to affirm and support marginalized student’s mental
health and work to avoid retraumatizing students in the classroom. As such, this essay offers suggestions for how instructors can implement these considerations on a classroom level so that they can promote diversity in education while taking the mental well-being of the marginalized students they impact into consideration.

**Recommendation #1—Intentionally and Explicitly Address Emotional Labor**

Instructors should assess the emotional labor required of marginalized students when determining how rigorous their class is. Instructors often solely evaluate a course’s intellectual rigor, but when discussing topics that have a component of violence or trauma, emotional labor is a factor that cannot be ignored. Attuning to emotional labor starts before the semester begins. First, instructors should recognize that students with racially marginalized identities in general who attend HWCU (Historically White Colleges and Universities) face additional emotional labor in the campus environment because of their identity and this does not get left at the door when they walk into a classroom (Evans & Moore, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021). Froyum (2014) asserts that studying issues related to race “evokes unique emotions to manage” with students of color potentially feeling anger and frustration or even depression (p. 82). Instructors should find ways to account for emotional labor that can come with homework and in class discussions where topics are heavier.

Second, instructors must assess how emotionally taxing and potentially triggering their reading lists for courses could be. Communication Studies scholars have published a multitude of exemplary articles that provide insight into the relationship among communication, oppression, and inclusion. Instructors should assign work about, for example, Matthew Shephard’s murder (Ott & Aoki, 2002), White supremacy and racial violence (Ore, 2019), and sexual violence (Pollino, 2020). However, instructors must remain aware of how scholarship itself can retraumatize students and require additional emotional labor. For example, in our classrooms, we work to ensure that whenever we assign an emotionally laborious article, we require less total reading that week for the class to help counteract the emotional labor required to engage the readings. This allows for students to process the demanding topic without an additional heavy workload on top of the emotional labor they are being asked to perform.

At the beginning of the semester, instructors can intentionally set expectations and boundaries around emotional labor with students. Preemptively alerting students to potential stressors in course content and discussing how students can set boundaries with the subsequent emotional labor will enable them to make informed decisions about course enrollment and how to care for themselves. Instructors can do this by providing trigger warnings about material that may invoke negative personal or psychological responses and/or retraumatize students, including material about racial violence. Trigger warnings help students engage fully in their education and provide them with the freedom necessary to navigate and avoid trauma (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018, p. 107). Additional boundaries may include: (1) informing students about places students may skip over in readings that deal with racial trauma, (2) providing space to mute their audio or turn off their camera on Zoom/taking a break after content is covered, (3) informing students that they can leave the classroom during difficult conversations, and (4) providing a pause before and after heavy conversations to acknowledge the emotional weight of the material instead of a purely theoretical or methodological discussion. Conversations about race, justice, and equality must occur in ways that do not place additional trauma and stress on people of color, especially in educational spaces like the classroom. Viewing course content and having these conversations without acknowledging the emotional labor and personal trauma students may experience risks
both stereotyping the strength of students of color and falsely assumes a separation of major events surrounding racial injustice and students’ personal identities. By providing trigger warnings that can acknowledge emotional labor concerning content concerning identity-related stressors, instructors can express empathetic concern that may validate and encourage students to take the necessary precautions when approaching this content.

**Recommendation #2: Teach Inclusive Stress Management Techniques**

Instructors should also tell students that their primary responsibility is to care for themselves and their mental health. In our class, we established that the “first rule” of the semester was to “take care of your glow” (see Hester & Squires, 2018), and we repeatedly reminded each other of this phrase throughout the semester. In addition to establishing the importance of one’s mental well-being in the classroom, we also encourage instructors to include lessons about managing stress and other mental health challenges as a part of the course content. Instructors should also adapt stress management techniques with explicit focus on historically excluded student populations, including students of color and trans students. Several typical stress management activities like going for a walk or car ride entail a different level of risk depending on one’s race and ethnicity (Landertinger et al., 2021). Similarly, trans students may not feel safe enough in restrooms for anxiety-reducing techniques that involve gathering oneself in the restroom. Instead of sharing these techniques, instructors should promote more inclusive stress management practices in the classroom. For example, box breathing and finger mustache exercises remain relatively more inclusive. Box breathing involves inhaling for 4 seconds, holding one’s breath for 4 seconds, exhaling for 4 seconds, pausing for 4 seconds, and then repeating the process. When completing the finger mustache exercise, one should press on the pressure point at the base of one’s nose with one’s finger and then begin taking several deep breathes. Using time at the end of an in-class discussion to decompress and focus on something lighter is also a way to account for emotional labor. Something as small as creating a “feel good” playlist collectively as a group that can be shuffled for the last 5 minutes of class can help students transition out of a more negative emotional headspace. In our course, we routinely completed our deep breathing exercises for the last 5 or 10 minutes after discussing emotionally difficult material. Providing a clear mental end point can help students recenter before they leave the classroom and hopefully counteract at least some of the emotional labor they had to do in class.

**Recommendation #3: Provide Internal and External Support**

Communication Studies instructors likely do not have expertise about the mental health challenges students face, so instructors should balance providing internal support in the form of listening to students and connecting students with other resources. Connecting students with external resources can also help reduce the emotional labor that instructors must use to navigate issues of oppression that they experience. First, listening remains a highly applicable skill taught in communication classrooms, but how instructors teach this skill and execute it themselves when interacting with students is crucial in creating an equitable classroom. Empathetic listening shows the speaker that listening is occurring through active verbal and nonverbal cues. Empathetic listening also centers on working to understand the speaker’s point of view or experience (Wilde et al., 2006). In classroom discussions, emphasizing listening to understand rather than listening to respond is important especially when marginalized students might be sharing traumatic or triggering things that happened to them. An example of this could be a student talking about hearing slurs or having slurs directed at them on campus. Although many will not have experienced that specific situation, it is important for instructors to encourage the
class to listen from the perspective of believing that student’s lived experience. Instructors too should validate students’ experiences by showing they have listened to what they have to say and care about how they feel. By modeling this behavior, instructors can foster a climate of acceptance and understanding in the classroom, in addition to instructing students to use the skill of listening outside of the classroom.

Second, instructors should use course documents and assignments to connect students with support and opportunities to create change. Student groups offer support and community that can enable academic success, communication skills, and a more positive sense of self (Kuk et al., 2008). For students of color, student groups foster a sense of belonging, support systems, and opportunities to pursue change on campus—all of which contribute to student success and retention (Museus, 2008). To facilitate student participation in these groups, instructors should provide information about campus student groups on their course page and in the syllabus. Especially in classes that have informative presentations, such as the public speaking classroom, instructors could design assignments around raising awareness about student groups and community organizations (Ruiz-Mesa & Hunter, 2019; Sanford, 2018). For example, the third author designed an informative speech assignment where students shared information about resources that students could use to help address food insecurity, mental health challenges, and career development in his public speaking course. These assignments enable students to connect with external support and develop support networks. Researching local organizations maintains the added benefit of illustrating potential career options with those organizations to students. The assignment enables students to learn about the current support systems at their institution, the limitations of those networks of support, and decipher the best avenue for change moving forward (see Olson, 2018). For example, if support groups do not exist on campus, the instructor can develop them or include assignments, such as a persuasive speech or debate, that advocate for their development on campus. Instructors may also consider forming student groups that will provide marginalized students with additional support; for example, the instructor could create a “student of color meet and greet” to provide space for students of color in all their sections to connect with each other and foster community outside of the classroom. Instructors can even provide students with information about mobile apps that can help students develop deep breathing practices and track their mental health status (see Chittaro & Sioni, 2014). When instructors encourage students to care for their mental health, they should remain inclusive in these recommendations and contemplate how certain students may not have the same access to stress management techniques as others. As much as instructors may wish that they will provide ample support to students in their inclusive classroom setting, instructors should recognize the limitations to the classroom environment and help connect students to support and affirmation in other settings.

Conclusion

This article posits that instructors must equip themselves with tools to support marginalized students’ mental health as colleges and universities continue to debate and address issues related to diversity, inclusion, and justice. Instructors are not alone in their need to address the mental health ramifications of oppression. Colleges and universities share a need to address mental health challenges related to oppression and efforts to curtail it with other organizations. Businesses and nonprofits likely face a similar dynamic to institutions of higher education; like students, employees and clients must navigate trauma and mental health challenges. Recent and ongoing conversations about the “Great Resignation” underscores this point; employees continue to experience burnout and related mental health issues like anxiety and depression (Thompson, 2021). Although we framed our recommendations as being for instructors, business owners and managers too could implement these strategies to help employees
and clients, especially when their organization directly discusses inclusion and when traumatic events occur. The recommendations can enable anyone to remain proactive in affirming and supporting those navigating trauma and their mental health.

Especially in the wake of tragedy, discussions about diversity and inclusion can retraumatize students. As advocates continue to push for structural and systematic changes, instructors still must proactively pursue diversity and justice in the classroom in the interim. This article’s recommendations allow instructors to do precisely that, by providing instructors with tools that empower them to support students and their mental health.

References


Countering the Service-Learning Privilege Problem Through Critical Communication Pedagogy and Critical Assessment

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Keywords: service learning, critical communication pedagogy, critical assessment, social justice pedagogy

Abstract: Because the communication discipline values action, civility, and service, it has placed emphasis on the integration of service-learning in its courses. Service-learning has the potential to bridge the gap between the classroom and the community by employing social justice pedagogy–activism that takes critical learning to sites of hegemony. However, service-learning can also promote the unintended side effect of entrenching beliefs about privilege. Therefore, we advocate for a critical service-learning to be facilitated through a critical communication pedagogy (CCP) framework, which emphasizes the recognition and response to hegemony that students encounter. Such an approach employs critical assessment, a means by which to reframe traditional assessment procedures to focus on both content knowledge and its application to ameliorate hegemony in society.

Introduction

The discipline of communication makes a commitment to being a discipline of action, civic engagement, and social justice. Communication is concerned with the applied nature of knowledge (Frey & Palmer, 2014); therefore, communication strives to teach its students ways in which to apply course content and theories to their lives. One effective way to accomplish this goal is by integrating service-learning in communication courses. Service-learning has the potential to bridge the gap between learning that is confined within the classroom walls and learning in and with the community. Service-learning can
involve social justice pedagogy—activism that takes critical learning to sites of hegemony. Eby (1998) explains that “Service-learning has the potential to transform teaching and learning in the academy and to call a generation of students to develop social responsibility and an ethic of service” (p. 1).

Historically, service-learning has been seen as an opportunity for students to step into a community, other than ones to which they belong, and perform tasks with the community to better the lives of its members. Although some service-learning opportunities involve entrance into communities that embody privilege, interacting with marginalized groups has historically been a common way of conceptualizing service-learning. While service-learning has a myriad of benefits for students, problems can occur when students do interact with marginalized groups. Students often do not understand the power dynamics inherent in the relationships that they forge within these communities, especially if the students come from privileged backgrounds. Depending on the students’ background they may also lack critical skill sets necessary to reflect on their own positionality, power dynamics, the nature of these relationships, or how learning is done in conjunction with these groups. Hence, in this essay, we propose critical service-learning, which embodies the critical communication pedagogy (CCP) commitments of power, dialogue, and self-reflexivity (Fassett & Warren, 2007). This approach will help to educate our students to be better equipped with critical literacies to understand dimensions of relationships and layers of power dynamics in service-learning projects. The following sections provide an overview of service-learning and discuss the commitments of CCP.

### Service-Learning

One impetus for the integration of service-learning in communication classes is that educators are concerned with students’ lack of civic engagement (Kennerly & Davis, 2014). In fact, the problem has been described as “so alarming as to question what and who will be preserving key democratic values in the future” (Harward, 2008, para. 1). Therefore, the integration of service-learning has been growing in communication programs specifically because the discipline of communication values the preservation of these civic engagement and democratic values (Oster-Aaland et al., 2004). Additionally, service-learning allows for problem-solving and the application of theory in a culturally diverse society (Smith, 2014), in addition to the promotion of justice (Frey et al., 2020).

Service-learning employed in an educational context provides students with the opportunity to experience cultural practices that might be similar to or different from their own. Service-learning can take place in a myriad of ways and students may interact with people of various backgrounds. Not all service-learning experiences involve interaction with marginalized groups, and not all students who participate in these projects embody privilege. The focus of this reflection, however, is specifically oriented on the experiences of working with historically marginalized communities because service-learning has the potential to positively affect both parties in this type of environment (Furco & Norvell, 2019). Through these interactions, students may learn about issues that marginalized groups face. However, this knowledge often remains at a surface level because students often do not possess the tools necessary to understand the nature of these communities or understand their own positionality, regardless of their standpoints, when they engage with these interactions. Additionally, in collaboration with these groups, students can work to develop solutions that could improve their social conditions. Unless students are equipped with the tools of CCP or critical service-learning, their solutions may not fully satisfy the needs of the community with which they work. Because of these limitations, the application of service-learning is often less than stellar. Specifically, service-learning has several unintended consequences if
students are not first provided with a critical background enabling them to engage with marginalized populations, understand their own privileges, and recognize their similarities with the members of the communities with which they are working.

Inherent Problems With Service-Learning

Self-Aggrandizement

Students arrive at college with unique perspectives deriving from their own socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Some students are economically privileged, while others come from historically marginalized backgrounds. Regardless of background, all students benefit from learning to better recognize privilege and respond to it critically. Students, especially those coming from White, elite, privileged backgrounds, are taught by society to believe that service should benefit the doer just as much as the groups with whom they work. Thus, when students with privileges interact with marginalized groups in their communities, they may do so, sometimes unknowingly, as a means by which to feel important. As a result, although service should foster humility, it has become a form of condescension (Deresiewicz, 2014). When this occurs, students never question who is serving and learning from whom, and the power dynamics inherent within their interactions. When students engage in service-learning, their privilege often causes them to approach it as they have been inculcated to do, believing that their work is noble and honorable. Thus, when students engage with marginalized groups, they frequently demonstrate this ideology by desiring to complete their assigned projects but showing less interest in actually assisting those in need (Steimel, 2013) or questioning the nature of these relationships and power dynamics between them. Deresiewicz (2014) explains this phenomenon:

“Service” is a flock of middle-class messiahs, descending in all their virtue, with a great deal of self-satisfaction, every once in a while, when they remember to think about it, upon the miserable and helpless. Like “leadership,” it is a form of self-aggrandizement. (p. 126)

Service-learning necessitates dedicated communication with any community, but marginalized populations in society in particular. However, unless critical approaches are employed, service-learning can carry neocolonial tendencies since it is built on the idea of helping those who are less privileged, who seemingly cannot help themselves. Because service-learning often distorts itself into a form of self-aggrandizement, the practice teaches students to confuse the concepts of need and deficiency, incorrectly learning to view marginalized populations as deficient (Eby, 1998). When this occurs, students can form inflated ideas of self-worth, believing that their work can fix their deficiency.

Entrenchment of Economic Privilege

Self-aggrandizement can deepen students’ sense of economic privilege. Specifically, service-learning can entrench hegemonic beliefs about economic privilege that derive from neoliberal thought. Neoliberalism, the current iteration of capitalism, has extended the belief that students can do good for marginalized groups, but in so doing, should derive some personal benefit. This benefit can manifest itself through the entrenchment of pecuniary hegemony. Hence, this particular idea fits with the neocolonial tendencies and how the “other” or “marginalized” is conceptualized and treated. Neoliberalism has perpetuated the myth that people who lack economic resources are not victims of an economy that privileges consumerism over collective responsibility (Kahl, 2018a). Instead, they are viewed as individuals who lack the intelligence, willpower, and/or skills to achieve economic success. Some students forget that
these characteristics are often disguised in toxic Whiteness. Ciepley (2017) explains that corporations communicate this nefarious ideology by saying, “If you fail in the market, you should accept the consequences, and not expect the wealth generated . . . to be redistributed to you” (para. 41).

Because of this, communication students may believe that their time (Steimel, 2013), energy, and resources are more important than those communities with which they work. Thus, students may enter into communicative interactions believing that the marginalized groups with whom they interact have failed in the market, negatively influencing their interactions. These students may make a fundamental attribution error (Robinson, 2017), inaccurately ascribing economic situations in which marginalized groups find themselves to internal flaws rather than understanding that their situations are directed by neoliberal economic policies external to their control. Additionally, as explained by standpoint theory (Harding, 1991), students may not take time to discover the cause of wealth disparity and leave the experience with a heightened sense of entitlement and classism. Hence, they may lack critical reflexivity to understand their positionality, power dynamics embedded in these types of relationships, and the nature of learning and teaching that occurs. In some cases, however, students who come from historically marginalized communities are able to recognize privilege and oppression, but these students may need to learn to think critically about intersectionality of identities. Furthermore, because of the assumed role of the marginalized communities, students often fail to realize that they are learning from and with these communities. Instead, they see themselves as the source of knowledge. Hence, these issues must be critically examined through the lens of CCP to develop critical service-learning approaches and tools.

Using Critical Communication Pedagogy and Assessment to Reframe Service-Learning

As we have discussed, service-learning has the potential to be a transformative pedagogical practice, especially if it is informed by a critical perspective. However, for this to occur, students must approach the experience by applying a critical lens to their communicative interactions. Namely, students need to be able to examine their own privileges or oppression, understand their role in hegemonic society, and recognize that solutions to the amelioration of hegemony can only be realized through dialogic interaction, not through the imposition of ideas on a population. Students also need to be critical about their intentions in these service projects and carefully explain the role of power as they co-create knowledge by engaging with new communities. Applying a critical perspective to a service-learning experience can reframe it to teach students to learn civility, humility, and critical self-reflection to interrogate power structures that they may hold due to their privileged positions in society. To work toward this goal, we advocate for critical service-learning experiences to be developed and facilitated through the lens of CCP and critical assessment.

Critical Communication Pedagogy

A primary problem when sending communication students into the field to interact with marginalized populations is that they tend not to have a critical lens through which to view the world they enter. Rather, they often possess a neoliberal lens through which they view the world as black and white and without nuance. This can be true for both privileged and marginalized students. Neoliberalism teaches students that marginalized people have “chosen” to forego economic prosperity as a result of poor financial decision-making. Hence, students are not encouraged to question the larger social and cultural
structures that created or perpetuated such challenging circumstances. Additionally, if students do question these structures, they may not have appropriate tools with which to challenge them. Embodying this form of thinking, students, who are earning degrees in higher education, believe that they have made the “correct” economic choice to invest in their future, while oppressed groups have made the “incorrect” choices in their lives, choices that have resulted in their current economic and social state of being. Therefore, the rhetoric of neoliberal education creates a false consciousness and sets a particular way of conceptualizing success, which is often based on capitalistic and White, economically privileged, heterosexual, and able-bodied ideas.

CCP challenges students to uncover the hegemonic power structures that have inculcated them with these neoliberal thoughts. CCP involves the examination of and response to power in society. It involves the study of the intersections of pedagogy, communication, and power (Fassett & Warren, 2007). In doing so, it challenges instructors and students to identify and respond to hegemonic forces that privilege some and marginalize others. In this case, CCP, which involves a critical response to the ways power communicates, can aid students in gaining a critical, nuanced perspective regarding the populations with which they are working.

**Critical Assessment of Service-Learning**

A service-learning project transforms into a rich opportunity for critical learning when communication instructors frame it through CCP. The success of CCP rests on assessment. Critical assessment allows the instructor to gauge students’ paradigm shifts from the traditional, albeit troublesome, neoliberal perspective, to the more social-justice-minded critical communication perspective. Reflection papers, ethnographic or autoethnographic assignments, and journal reports (Kahl, 2018b) are tools that have been used for assessment, but we will focus more broadly on the questions critical assessment should answer, regardless of the specific assignment or tool an educator may choose to utilize. Two central questions should be asked when critically assessing service-learning: (1) How do students use course content to attempt to facilitate change? and (2) How are students learning to become critically engaged members of society who can facilitate change through collaboration with marginalized groups? Both of these questions are important in critical assessment. Too often, instructors focus their assessment efforts only on the application of content knowledge—half of the first question. Also, instructors often focus on students’ level of satisfaction with their experiences (Molee et al., 2010). While important, these foci deemphasize the broader question of whether communication students can adopt a paradigm shift from a neoliberal ideology to a critical one. In order to answer the two broad questions listed above, critical assessment must examine and assess the application of three commitments of CCP: power, dialogue, and reflexivity.

**Assessment of Power**

Students must become aware of the power structures/ideologies and dynamics involved in their service-learning project. Questions that students should be able to answer with greater detail and complexity as a service-learning project progresses include: What power structure(s) are you (the student) part of and how did you become a part of these structures? How do power structure(s) marginalize the community group with which you work? How do power structure(s) benefit by marginalizing them? What would a collective response to this hegemony look like?
Assessment of Dialogue

Freire (1970) discusses dialogue as fundamental to critical thinking, making dialogue an important component of the critical assessment of student learning. Thus, assessment of dialogue could include asking students to take detailed notes and/or record (with permission) their community partners to understand the current situation, dialogue about change, and engage in collective decision-making. Assessing dialogue means that students should display the knowledge and ability to take the perspective of marginalized people and understand them through their own words. Assessment of dialogue includes encouraging students to continuously reframe their thought processes to foster greater sensitivity to nefarious ways in which neoliberal hegemony functions to subjugate these groups.

Assessment of Reflexivity

Finally, one of the most important ways in which critical assessment of service-learning differs from traditional assessment measures is that it employs reflexivity. Traditional assessment of service-learning, even when it does employ aspects of personal contemplation, tends merely to involve reflection. Reflection asks students to simply discuss what they did, how they felt about it, how they helped marginalized populations, and how their lives were enhanced through their participation in the project. In contrast, reflexivity challenges students to critique their experiences during the project. Reflexivity challenges students to consider both their work to mitigate the effects of power as well as their recognition of their participation in it (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Reflexivity requires students to reexamine their own beliefs by reflecting upon the origin of their values, thoughts, and words. This way students can illuminate the power dynamics and structures that keep marginalized populations perpetually in oppressed positions.

These questions regarding power, dialogue, and reflexivity can be discussed in class and included in assignments throughout a service-learning project. Thus, the goal of critical assessment of service-learning is a means by which instructors can discern the degree to which students are becoming critically conscious individuals and civically minded members of society. A key component of the critical assessment of service-learning is to determine the degree to which students understand power dynamics within their own experience. One means by which instructors can determine students’ understanding of power is through the writing of self-reflexive reports. In such reports, students can act reflexively about their experiences by writing about “contemplative engagement, cultural understanding, critical exploration, collective action, and creative application” (Blinne, 2021, p. 287).

After students have completed their work with their organizations, students can present their work to the class, university faculty, and community leaders to create awareness of the societal conditions that have subjugated people in order to move toward conscientization—recognition and praxis-oriented action (Freire, 1970). Representatives of the marginalized groups should be present at the presentation in order to share their voices and to speak about their life experiences so that all involved can learn how they can foster change.

Conclusion

In this essay, we propose a pedagogical shift regarding the ways in which instructors and students approach service-learning. In the current grade-driven academic culture in which academic achievement becomes valued over learning and the critical evaluation of societal inequality (Rudick, 2021), a need exists to reframe the ways in which students interact with marginalized groups in society. When
service-learning is reframed and assessed as a critical act, it can be transformed from the traditional act of reflection which merely teaches students to learn to serve and serve to learn (Mitchell, 2008) to a pragmatic CCP process that involves “a social change orientation” which works to “redistribute power” by “developing authentic relationships” with marginalized populations (Mitchell, 2008, p. 53). We argue that this reframing can occur if service-learning is reframed and assessed in a way that challenges students to examine the hegemony that has privileged them and subjugated others. It is important to note that a single experience of critically oriented service-learning will not completely change a student's attitude from one of privilege to one of social justice advocacy. Holding such a belief would be incorrect and naïve. However, a critically oriented service-learning experience has the potential to accomplish two important goals. First, critical assessment grounded in the commitments of CCP helps instructors to determine if students are beginning to approach service-learning in ways that counter neoliberal manifestations. When this occurs, students begin to understand the true purpose of service-learning through their knowledge of power, dialogue, and self-reflexivity. When students undertake service-learning through the lens of CCP, and are assessed as such, they are more likely to resist the self-aggrandizement that service-learning tends to foster and replace it with justice (Deresiewicz, 2014). Second, because the critical assessment of service-learning reframes the way in which students view the process, the application of critical assessment has the potential to begin to cultivate a sense of civic responsibility for students so that they may learn the importance of intervening into sites of oppression.

**References**


