Catering to Customers or Cultivating Communicators? Divergent Educational Roles of Communication Centers

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Abstract

To remain sustainable in an atmosphere of shrinking budgets and curricular retrenchment, oral communication instruction via communication centers on college and university campuses must satisfy several constituencies. How can communication centers meet stakeholder interests driven by different paradigms of higher education? This study examines how student clients ($n = 29$) and peer consultants/tutors ($n = 11$) characterize their educational experiences at communication centers in responses to open-ended surveys. Thematic analysis using grounded theory reveals two divergent perceptual frameworks: a transactional paradigm geared to pleasing consumers and a transformational paradigm oriented to persona development and self-sufficiency. Reconciliation of these potentially conflicting perspectives may enable communication centers to meld effective instruction with efficient service.

Key Words: speaking center, communication center, consumerism, student as consumer, transformative learning, communication education, speech communication, pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The entities known as "communication centers" are the sites or the clusters of personnel devoted to developing oral communication skills at institutions of higher learning. Serving broader constituencies and performing more varied functions than their predecessors, narrowly defined as "speech labs" focusing on public speaking, communication centers hone the communication competencies of faculty, staff, and students, often spanning preparation for group projects, information-gathering interviews, stylistic and content development, interpersonal interactions, and confidence-building for public presentations. In this study, "client" denotes a student user of a communication center's services. "Consultant" refers to the communication center staff members who offer assistance to students. All the participants in this study were undergraduate consultants, so the consultations were peer-to-peer meetings.

Communication centers usually operate as co-curricular components in higher education; therefore, they face special challenges amid times of financial retrenchment that may target instructional activities beyond the classroom as non-essential and thus vulnerable to budget cuts. This study explores how communication centers fulfill conflicting roles that epitomize the tensions lying at the core of American higher education. Close analysis of how the users of communication centers describe their experience suggests that communication centers may become a focal point for reconciling a market-driven, economically framed transactional pedagogical philosophy with a transformational approach that stresses personal responsibility and intellectual challenge. Using qualitative data gathered from consultants, active clients, and past clients, this study explores the ways commodification and transformation infuse and inform discourse about what communication center do. Attention then turns to techniques that could alleviate the tensions between these frameworks. Finally, reservations about the study are considered and lead to suggestions for further research.

2. Method

This study included a total of 40 participants (26 females, 14 males). The self-reported racial/ethnic breakdown of the participants was 70% White, 17% Black, 2% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 2 % multiracial, and 5% unspecified. The educational level of participants was 30% freshmen, 22% sophomore, 20% junior, 17% senior, and 10% had earned their undergraduate degree. Thirty-six participants were students at a small (enrollment 1,800), highly selective, non-sectarian, suburban liberal arts college in the southeastern United States. Of these participants, 24 were active clients (current student users) of the communication center, 5 were past clients, and 7 were consultants employed at the center. Active clients averaged 2.25 previous visits to the communication center, with the number of prior visits ranging from zero to 15. As an additional validity check and to add demographic diversity, four more participants (all of them speaking center consultants) were recruited from a mid-size (enrollment 18,500), urban, public university in the southeastern United States.

All participants completed brief questionnaires administered as hard copies or online. No time limit was specified or enforced, anonymity of each respondent was assured, and participants received no compensation or extra credit. This procedure extends the work of Ward and Schwartzman (2009), who used thematic analysis of responses to open-ended questionnaires to investigate the interpersonal components of communication center consultations. Unlike those researchers, the authors of the present study sought to reveal the philosophies of education that emerged in the ways consultants and clients discussed their consultations. In this case, the answers provided by the respondents were coded as empirical indicators of higher-order theories, namely paradigms governing how communication centers should function.

Open-ended questions were employed to generate the key data (aside from demographics) for all respondents because this format encourages more open, detailed, and genuine feedback than objective tools provide (Patton, 2002). More precisely, the consultants were asked questions that prompted them to describe challenging moments during their experience at the center. This approach is akin to critical incident technique (CIT) methodology, whereby participants focus on describing events or situations that tested their skills and resourcefulness. Concentrating on such incidents gives richer qualitative data about how and why competencies are applied in real-world contexts (Brunton & Jeffrey, 2010). In this study, honing in on communication barriers prompted respondents to show rather than speculate on how they approached the consultation process.

One question asked respondents to explain the communication barriers that can arise in difficult consultations. The next question asked how the consultant tried to overcome these obstacles. This question format was mirrored in the questionnaires distributed to past clients, since they had some distance from prior consultations and could reflect on their experiences. Current clients were asked more narrowly focused open-ended questions, since many of these clients might not have had sufficient communication center exposure to reflect on noteworthy incidents. Current clients were asked to identify the most important thing they learned, the most important thing left unanswered, and what could be improved in their consultations.

Grounded theory attempts to aggregate seemingly random, unrelated responses by suggesting the explanatory rubrics that could account for emergent patterns (Goldkuhl & Cronholm, 2010). Grounded theory was combined with thematic analysis to seek the principles that guide how consultants and clients conceive of their educational experiences at the communication center. The respondents offered highly denotative responses, stating opinions and observations in literal terms. Open coding of the responses was conducted, with substantive codes emerging by categorizing the responses that exhibited similar themes (Hernandez, 2009). The researchers generated the categorization of the data by asking several questions: What prevailing views of communication center consultations do the responses reflect? More generally, how might these responses cluster in relation to more general paradigms of how the educational process functions? Could one or more families of master metaphors furnish frameworks that express the rationales for converging and diverging themes? The objective, in line with the principles of grounded theory, was to generate the theoretical explanation that accounted for the largest concentration of themes. Thematic analysis concentrated on identifying substantive patterns that emerged in the content of responses.

3. Thematic Analysis

The themes in the students' open-ended self-reports of their experiences at the communication center cluster around two predominant leitmotifs. Upon closer analysis, these thematic clusters reflect larger interpretive schema best summarized as divergent paradigms guiding the respondents' understanding of higher education.

The transactional paradigm discretely defines consultants as service providers and clients as receivers of discrete commodities, along the lines of producers and consumers in a commercial exchange. The transformational paradigm configures consultants and clients as collaborative partners in a joint venture to develop oral communication competencies. While the commercial paradigm treats communication center consultations as instrumental to achieving short-term goals (e.g., earning a higher grade on an assignment), the transformational paradigm portrays consultations as part of an ongoing process of becoming a better communicator. Within the transactional framework, the client plays a more passive role of a consumer reliant on the consultant to satisfy the desire for a specific outcome. The transformational framework positions consultants more as catalysts for continual growth as a communicator, acknowledging a need to challenge both the consultant and the client.

Although they represent different approaches to education, the transactional and transformational paradigms can and do coexist within communication centers. The challenge lies in how to reconcile them when they are applied to the same process: the personal consultations that form the core of communication center operations. The two paradigms crystallize into pairs of contrasting attributes, as deeper thematic examination reveals.

3.1. Service Providers/Receivers vs. Co-Creators of Competencies

Sacks (1996) contends that consumerism has transformed into "hyperconsumerism" by extending to realms heretofore unaffected by a commercial mentality. In the realm of education, the model of a commercial transaction translates into receipt of a product with the purchaser exerting minimal effort (Sacks, 1996, p. 156). In fact, greater effort would reduce value because convenience counts as an advantage that makes the product more desirable. Sacks (1996) offers a vivid comparison: "Indeed, some consumers of education seem to invest no more personal responsibility in the transaction than a McDonald's customer buying a Quarter Pounder with cheese" (p. 156). The McDonald's comparison is fortuitous, since it echoes the analogy that George Ritzer draws in his classic *The McDonaldization of Society*.

Ritzer (1996) argues that the commercial model prioritizes efficiency, but achieves it by failing to account for the less quantifiable facets of educational quality. He notes: "Efficiency is clearly advantageous to consumers, who can obtain what they need more quickly with less effort" (p. 35). Reconfigured in discursive terms, Ritzer elaborates the conceptual tension between quantity and quality. The transactional model epitomized by McDonald's achieves consistency and predictability across locations and over time. Consistency minimizes uncertainty, so the method of quantifiable mass production excels at re-production. This orientation directly contrasts with the transformational paradigm, which treats a challenge to the status quo as the stimulus for self-reflection and creative adaptation. A core component of transformational learning is the cultivation of *dis*equilibrium, which alters behavioral patterns instead of replicating them (Senyshyn & Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2009; Walton, 2010).

The minimalist approach of students is analogous to what digital media studies have labeled "satisficing." This neologism melds "satisfaction" with "sacrifice." Satisficing refers to exerting the minimum effort necessary to obtain the results that answer an inquiry. Instead of laboring to find the most thorough, competent, detailed answers to their queries, searchers for information satisfice by settling for the most easily obtainable results. Searchers on the web prefer convenience to comprehensiveness. They "look for sufficiently good answers rather than exhaustively seek the best answer" (Halavais, 2009, p. 87). Similarly, the satisficing consumer at a communication center does not seek continuous competency improvement (analogous to continuous quality improvement driven by high consumer standards). This type of consumer sacrifices the potentially higher level of achievement attendant to greater expenditures of time and effort. The satisfaction comes through acquiring enough information, skill, or advice to suffice in fulfilling the immediate need. A tradeoff results, whereby the client (like the online search engine user) sacrifices higher competency levels and more intensive knowledge-seeking processes for the satisfaction of a quicker, more convenient solution (such as a single consultation or skimming only the first couple of search results).Some linguistic nuances in the responses reveal the potential for divergent understanding of how communication centers function. One client states: "I wish my tutor could have *given* me ways to make my presentation less scientific and more enjoyable" (emphasis added). Several features of this brief comment merit attention. The responsibility for improvement falls squarely on the speaking center consultant, who "gives" the means for improvement. This perspective fits with configuring the consultant-client relationship more as a transaction ("give me what I want") than as a dialogue that imposes mutual obligations on the participants (Ward & Schwartzman, 2009).

The client's comment also presumes that the consultant possesses tools that will "make my presentation" have the desired characteristics. The role of the consultant resembles a specific kind of provider: an expert mechanic who can fix deficiencies or perform the pedagogical equivalent of *Pimp My Ride*. The analogy of the mechanic receives fuller attention below, but the main point here is that the client's remark treats the means for improvement as something simply received rather than the product of ongoing collaborative development with the consultant. This self-casting as the passive receiver of services has been identified as a central problem with the student-as-consumer educational model (Cheney, McMillan, & Schwartzman, 1997; McMillan & Cheney, 1996; Schwartzman, 1995; Schwartzman, 2010b). The issue is not simply one of taking on the role of the consumer, but in the type of consumer role the student plays. Probing the consumer analogy clarifies this point.

Consumers come in many varieties. Some consumers meticulously shop for quality, and their demands for high performance push producers to reduce defects, improve functionality, and extend durability of goods. These consumers resemble the students deeply engaged in coursework and collegiate life, the students who question and challenge ideas. Other consumers qualify as "bargain basement" shoppers interested only in low cost and maximum convenience. This species of consumer desires the cheapest, least demanding route to course or degree completion. The discursive drivers of consumerism often steer thought and action on campuses toward the passive consumer role. Instead of communication centers partnering with students to experiment with innovative techniques and explore new ideas, centers and their staffs function reactively to what the "customer" demands, since the customer is always right (regardless of the type of customer) and the guiding hand of The ("Free") Market is presumably benign. The version of the consumer as someone who simply receives goods and demands that desires be fulfilled seems inimical to developing responsible participants in a democracy (Bellah. Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1992).

3.2. Atomistic, Short-Term vs. Holistic, Developmental Learning

The approach to building communication competencies in a transformative learning framework involves long-term development. This perspective contrasts with a transactional approach that, while seeking to exceed consumer expectations, offers no rationale for developing any consumer competencies (other than perhaps "brand loyalty"). The long-term orientation is necessary to implement the "whole person" approach that characterizes transformational learning (Taylor, 2009). The holistic viewpoint emerges in discourse about communication centers when terminology relates to, for instance, developing better speakers as opposed to the more situation-specific objective of giving a better speech.

The atomistic approach links each consultation to its instrumental function of improving performance on a specific assignment. The difference seems subtle, but it carries weight. The atomistic approach does not invite or require a student to cross-apply techniques learned for one assignment to a different context. Each assignment, each goal, and possibly each consultation can be treated as discrete because the student concentrates on the immediate objective. The holistic approach is more self-reflexive and integrative, treating each consultation or assignment as an opportunity to build communicative capacity. Choy (2009) claims that transformative learning transcends skill acquisition to generate changes in frame of reference because individuals and groups step out of their "habits of minds." This capacity-building enables the communicator to rely on the personal knowledge and skill base developed cumulatively through the consultation experience. Instead of each consultation linking linearly to a specific assignment or skill deficit, a transformative orientation considers how consultations (note the plural) contribute to one's personal resources for communicating effectively. In communication centers this transformative pedagogy empowers learners by equipping them with the resources to go beyond what is needed for a given assignment. This empowerment is analogous to the transition from received knowing to subjective knowledge chronicled in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997). Received knowers treat consultants as experts to solve problems or do the work *for* them (a complaint consultants expressed repeatedly). Received knowers depend on the consultant instead of acknowledging and exercising their own capabilities. A past client describes this assumption of personal responsibility and the spirit of collaboration:

> I feel that these [communication] barriers weren't addressed by the consultant alone…it was a definite team effort. I always arrived with a list of questions/things to work on which my tutor followed. I arrived especially at unbusy hours which allowed my tutor to work with me uninterrupted. (ellipses in original)

By empowering clients to take some responsibility for their own development as communicators, consultations can become more collaborative endeavors.

Contrary to this transformational process, the consumer-oriented extent of changes in frame of reference seems to be limited to the desired outcomes from the consultations. Comments from current clients show that changes in frame of reference are relative to immediate needs and expectations being met. Questionnaires on the most important thing that clients learned in their consultants received responses targeted to their intended objective and purpose of the consultation, primarily working on organization and/or delivery of presentations. Some responses included specific comments such as "slow down," "organization," "organization of thoughts," "how to introduce my speech," "it's okay to have silent pauses," "interview skills—linking each question to specific scholarship topic," "posturing and formality," "speed up and be a little more enthusiastic," etc. While these responses seem pedestrian, they exhibit a consistent pattern of localizing the lessons learned to specific components of a presentation. Not once did current clients specify anything they learned about *themselves*. This absence of self-reflection is not surprising, especially when many of the respondents very few (mean = 2.25) previous consultations. Walton (2010) observes that transformational learning for communication students evolves gradually and at different paces, just as different people exhibit different physical growth rates. One important role consultations can play is to guide clients toward internalizing the communication process, treating communication skills less as secrets gleaned from a guru than as ongoing competency development.

Responses from current clients also exhibit a notable lack of surprise at anything learned. No respondents discussed how their previous assumptions were challenged or overturned. This absence of affect might signify the developmental stage of the respondents. They seemed wedded to the notion that communication competencies are things to be learned more than practices to be cultivated. This externalization of communication skills comports well with a transactional model. If the stated communicative objectives are equivalent to goods that one acquires, this acquisition always depends on an external supplier. Maintaining a clear-cut distinction between producers and consumers of goods can render the student-consumer an ongoing recipient—not a generator—of knowledge. Instead of empowerment, this version of commercialism could relegate students to engines of consumption.

3.3. Acquiring Products vs. Inquiring Minds

The transactional paradigm considers education as analogous to a financial transaction. Historically the producer-consumer transaction has assumed a discrete exchange of goods or services: the producer gives something, the consumer receives something in return. Conceptualized this way, education acquires value insofar as it can lead to the acquisition of something. The definable "product" of communication centers lies in whatever tangible results stem from consultations. One client explained why the consultation was helpful: "Went from 85% to 100% on speech grades." Several important questions arise. At what point do grades become the objective rather than the result of consultations? Are communication centers primarily instruments for grade improvement? Should they be? If, as the consumer-centered model holds, all outcomes must be quantifiable to count as results, then communication centers have value to the extent they serve as generators of higher grades. If this were the case, then the performance quality of consultants would be measured by the grades their clients receive. Another client identifies the main concern about the communication center was that the consultant "never had my professor." This client adds: "I just would have benefited from tutors familiar with my professor."

This concern has some legitimate foundation, since students must adapt to their professor's preferences just as any speaker or other performer must adapt to an audience. By identifying this point as the sole concern about the communication center, the respondent externalizes the goal as pleasing the teacher rather than mastering the competencies of communication. Effective communication techniques presumably transcend particular instructors or specialized fields, and this degree of universality enables consultants to mentor students across different majors and assignments. Apparently the respondent has not generalized the ability to apply and implement communication skills that cross disciplines. This generalizability comprises part of the rationale for infusing communication education across the curriculum (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009).Although the transactional paradigm foregrounds the consumer, it has little to say about the importance of self-development or the self-reflection so central to the transformational frame. Consumerism heavily emphasizes *getting*, but this stress on acquisition actually disempowers students by eliding the importance *being* or *becoming*—engaged citizens, responsible parents, etc.—without regard to attendant paybacks or rewards. Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion (2009) make this point in terms that sound as if they refer directly to communication center consultations: "Fromm's (1976) claim that the path to a being mode of existence is best followed with a guide, elevates the tutor from a simple 'customer service' role to the status of mentor, who aims to help the student achieve this state of being (rather than give the consumer skills and qualifications in an economic exchange)" (p. 282).

Framed as a finite commercial exchange, clients may approach a communication center as a site for acquiring an immediate result as opposed to a place to spur ongoing inquiry. This mentality can feed expectations for premature closure of the developmental process. Love (2008) recommends that the student as customer metaphor devalues the process of inquiry. He urges that education focus on instigating questions that fuel wonder and puzzlement, not provide answers that quell curiosity. This advice conforms closely to the transformational approach, which recommends embracing unsettling conditions that might provoke further reflection. Several clients express a clear view of the communication center as the answer center. Explaining why their consultations were helpful, active clients state: "All my questions were answered extensively." "Always left with questions answered." "I now know what I have to do to polish up [my] presentation!" The knowledge was acquired, bringing the transaction to a successful conclusion. Some active clients do not even risk posing questions in the first place. Prompted to state "the most important question that remains unanswered from my consultation," one respondent notes: "I didn't really go into it with questions."

Turning to consultants, they repeatedly note that their clients allocate insufficient time to develop their skills. Part of this time allocation may simply reflect the economic reality of students spending more time in their jobs to pay educational expenses or taking heavier course loads to accelerate their progress toward graduation and a prospective career. A consultant comments that clients devote "too little time to accomplish all the things that I think would be helpful," adding that clients too often drop by "close to closing time," thereby minimizing the time that can be devoted to improvement. Multiple consultants highlight the tendency of clients to enter the communication center unprepared or too close to an assignment's due date for the consultant to exercise due diligence in helping the client improve. The consultants express concern that many students arrive for consultations having done minimal or no preparation, expecting the consultant to provide the desired presentation tools. These remarks point to the respondents rejecting the tendency to cast consultants as providers of instant gratification. While focusing on efficiency has its advantages, it also can breed impatience with its emphasis on rapid results. Consultants take an incremental approach to skill development, recognizing that many reticent speakers may resist swift escalation of rigor. A long history of research on systematic desensitization, for example, shows that a gradual movement toward more challenging communication tasks can offer a solid foundation for developing confidence and competence (Schwartzman, 2010a).

Contrary to the core value of efficiency espoused by commercialism, consultants and clients may crave more extensive personal interactions that render the consultation process *less* efficient. Consultants equate effective skill development with extensive time expenditures, devoting as much time as possible to a client to remain, as one consultant puts it, "client-centered." While that terminology seems reminiscent of a consumer orientation, it stands at odds with the market-driven priority on maximizing productivity, where a communication center's success is measured in numbers of consultations or students "served" within a given time frame.

3.4. Fixer vs. Facilitator

Consultants emphasize their role as equipping students to become more self-sufficient communicators. Rather than provide quick answers and sending students on their way, consultants try to build students' resources for developing their own presentations. Consultants try to, in the words of one respondent, "work to pose questions to the students so they try and reach a conclusion on their own." Another consultant echoes this need to stimulate independent learning, commenting that "asking the client questions" is a key to overcoming communication barriers because it "helps them take greater responsibility for the work." The same consultant identifies a major barrier to effective consultations as "some clients want me to do all the work." These consultant comments demonstrate a clear disconnect between viewing the consultant as a *fixer* and the consultant as a *facilitator*. The fixer assumes responsibility for taking ameliorative action, analogous to a mechanic who mends a broken part or who improves the performance and aesthetic appeal of a vehicle. The facilitator willingly cedes some of the power of the fixer, acknowledging the consultant is not an expert who relieves students of their responsibilities. Instead, the consultant as facilitator provides a safe environment for students to experiment, to test their communicative techniques with a critical but supportive listener.

This theme of shared intellectual exploration corresponds to Freire's (1990, 2005) understanding of education as a dialogical endeavor rather than a hierarchical relationship between the teacher as authoritative sage and the learner as receptacle of knowledge. The consultant's educational role becomes transformational in a dual sense, reflecting the dialogical capacity to affect everyone involved in communication, regardless of formally established roles.

Clients can transform by evolving from receptacles of knowledge toward becoming responsible crafters of their own communication. Consultants can evolve by fostering client development rather than embracing a consultant's role as the definitive expert. One consultant recommends: "Make it collaborative [as opposed to] pedantic." This relinquishing of control requires humility, but it also weans students from dependence on consultants to provide instant, guaranteed recipes for successful presentations. The more self-effacing pedagogical approach measures success less by what consultants can do for clients than by how much clients learn to do for themselves.

Perceived asymmetries in knowledge about communication intrude as a challenge to collaborative consultations. A client observes that there was "the possible perception of the consultant that I am somehow academically inferior." A prime example of the how the consultant's stance as "expert" can foster such a concern appears in this statement from a consultant: "I feel that clients often come in with such a limited knowledge of public speaking that it's difficult to connect with them and explain some of the most basic speaking issues." Here the consultant assumes the role of privileged sage who imparts knowledge to needy clients. Consultations conducted on this basis become one-way communication, with the client cast as the passive receiver dependent on the consultant's wisdom. Clients cannot build greater self-sufficiency as communicators if the consultants hold all the tools.

Other consultants persistently express the desire to level power and status differences between themselves and clients. One consultant observes that even "when a student doesn't understand or put in an effort that I would as a student in the same class," it is important "to remind myself not to act 'superior' or more knowledgeable in an abrasive way." Reduction of power discrepancies can encourage development of greater communication competencies. For one client, friendliness did not sacrifice rigor. According to this client, the consultant "was very keen on noting flaws and correcting me in a very 'approachable' way." The "approachable" manner of the consultant reinforced the understanding that critiques of the performance did not constitute criticisms of the speaker. Contrary to a transactional approach primarily geared to pleasing the customer—often by providing consumers what they want instead of what they need—the transformational approach equips students to recognize the shortcomings of their own knowledge and performance. One measure of a consultation's educational quality may be its capacity to push participants beyond their comfort zones, to stimulate reflection rather than simply to fulfill desires (Carlson & Fleisher, 2002).

Lest one think that consultants instigate this transformative approach, a client notes: "I thought I could have received more constructive criticism. I did well on my speech when I presented it to the speech center, but I wish they could have found more to help with." This client clearly expresses the transformative orientation. The student seeks disequilibrium, challenging consultants to probe the presentation to discover new ways the student can alter it. This client does not rest contentedly with reassurances, but invites a stimulus to go beyond prior assumptions of what constitutes a "good" presentation. A past client explicitly refutes the "please the customer" mentality that avoids the discomfort of moving past one's comfort zone. "People *try and be nice* rather than expressing what they don't like about something for the sake of friendliness. Critique is what gets things that need to be changed, changed" (emphasis in original). The same respondent captures the delicate balancing act communication centers must perform in providing constructive criticism while simultaneously building confidence. "Ideally, I'd say people need to be blunt when consulting students, but this would undoubtedly drive people away from the speaking center."

4. Limitations and Implications

This investigation represents a preliminary foray into how communication center consultants and clients construe their perceptions of consultations and, by extension, their educational experience in communication centers. Although this research illuminates how students' roles (consultant or client) relate to their orientations to communication education, several potential concerns provide fertile ground for further study.

4.1. Potential Concerns

The generalizability of the findings might be limited due to the small number of respondents, especially on the consultant side. This study, however, is intended to be more illustrative than representative, especially since the thematic categories do not automatically accompany a student's role as consultant or client. While the training of consultants might predispose them to adopt more of a transformational orientation, the findings do not indicate the likelihood of consultants or clients adopting a particular educational paradigm. Additional studies could explore whether the observed transformational and transactional paradigms hold uniformly across a broader range of communication center clients and staff.

Specifically, does the transformational orientation characterize the approach of communication center consultants overall, or is this viewpoint an artifact of how this particular group of consultants was trained?

Demographic factors might introduce confounding variables that complicate the assignment of prevailing educational paradigms to the roles students assume in communication centers. In this study, all the clients and most of the consultants attended a small liberal arts college, a factor that skews the demographic toward higher wealth and academic achievement compared to many other students. The high costs associated with such an educational environment might predispose students to treat the educational experience as more of a commercial enterprise.

This concern, however, is unfounded. First, if the private educational environment were responsible for a more market-oriented approach to education, then why did the consultants in this environment uniformly gravitate toward a transformational approach? In addition, the prevalence of a consumer orientation throughout higher education has been noted in the United Kingdom (Love, 2008) and Australia (Bostock, 2002). By contrast, a study of Malaysian students found that despite the aggressively commercial and capitalistic environment, no respondents described their education as analogous to production of goods (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2010). It appears that market-oriented consumerism represents a choice of how to frame higher education rather than a natural outgrowth of a cultural milieu.

Another limitation lies in the construction of the questionnaires. The discursive qualities discussed in this study might be artifacts of the way questions were phrased, not indices of a deeper conceptual framework. The focus on critical incidents (i.e., communication barriers and how they were overcome) might artificially amplify contrasts between consumer and client viewpoints. This potential drawback might not pose a serious problem. Pairing a question about communication barriers with a question about overcoming these barriers should encourage respondents to seek convergences as well as divergences between consultants and clients.

4.2. Suggestions for Further Research

The results of this study should be taken as more suggestive than representative. The research is not intended to indicate that a particular framework—transactional, transformational, or otherwise—typifies the perspective of a given population. Rather than seek the qualitative equivalent of a measure of central tendency, this study attempts to construct a plausible theoretical framework to explain observed discursive patterns. This research offers an explanatory narrative that other researchers can extend, challenge, or alter. One vital area to explore would be whether and how other discursive frameworks infuse discourse about communication centers. Just as language can enliven or enfeeble conceptualization, communication centers can acquire the roles set for them by language. This study elucidates two of these linguistically constructed frames: transactional and transformational. Additional research could reveal other frameworks that emerge from closely analyzing actual discourse.

Several directions for further empirical investigation merit consideration. The results of the current study rely on one-shot data collection. This method leaves open the questions of whether or how descriptions of communication center activities evolve over time. Longitudinal studies of communication centers could illuminate how students' perspectives might alter as their own roles change (e.g., from client to consultant), as they mature (e.g., correlations between age and educational paradigm), or as they gain more distance from the consultation itself (e.g., sampling immediately after a consultation and re-sampling several weeks or months later).

Additional research should probe more deeply not only the presence of different educational paradigms relating to communication centers, but also the rationale underlying these interpretive frameworks. Larger pools of subjects would help in this regard, but more in-depth interviews would prove especially helpful. Do socioeconomic factors or shared experiences (such as exposure to heavily publicized budget cuts for higher education) affect the likelihood of students configuring themselves as consumers? Gathering more detailed explanations of respondents' frameworks would generate deeper reflection to tease out the genesis and justification for the positions the respondents articulate. The ability to ask follow-up questions in detailed personal interviews offers a distinct advantage over the brief, impersonal surveys that were distributed in the current study (Warren & Karner, 2005). Although this study was conducted using clientele and consultants at speaking centers specifically, it would be useful to extend similar research to writing centers or to communication centers that focus on oral and written communication. Additional research also could drill deeper into the role various demographic and experiential factors might play in the educational framework a student articulates.

For example, does the consumer orientation become more pervasive among students who reached maturity at the time that total quality management (TQM), the growth of for-profit universities, and steep declines in public funding for higher education made the mantras of efficiency and financial accountability more pervasive? Furthermore, does the framework for understanding communication centers—and education generally—correlate with a student's field of study? Would liberal arts majors exhibit more of a transformational orientation than those in more quantitative fields?

Another avenue for research could compare the frameworks in student discourse about communication centers to the discourse of other stakeholders, such as communication center directors, faculty, and administrators. Including these constituencies could shed light on additional discursive frameworks beyond the transactional and transformational paradigms. Different sets of respondents may indicate alternative roles for communication centers aside from "customer service centers" or "speech labs."

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