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Overcoming Public Speaking Anxiety: Practical Applications for Classroom Instruction

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During the 2013 Speech Communication Association of South Dakota annual conference, there was a lively discussion surrounding students' Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA). During the dialogue, numerous strategies on how to help reduce students' speaking anxiety were discussed. However, I was surprised at the number of suggestions that refuted tested and proven strategies for PSA reduction. Moreover, I was startled and dismayed to hear comments such as "I have just given up and allowed my students to read from a manuscript" or "the only way I can get [my students] to stay calm is when I allow them to write as many keywords on multiple notecards as they need." These instructors felt strongly that these were the most effective procedures to help their students cope with their speaking anxiety.

I share a different perspective; based on the abundance of literature on PSA reduction and successful strategies used within the curriculum at my institution, I posit that the tactics referenced above are not necessarily the best practices for helping students cope with their PSA. The aforementioned instructors, while certainly well-meaning, were not necessarily helping their students cope with their anxiety. Rather, they suggested strategies that overlooked PSA reduction and/or prohibited an opportunity for students to reduce their anxiety and increase their public speaking competency. I sympathize with these instructors as their methods were similar to those that I used early in my teaching career. Yet, through the years, I have utilized numerous strategies which have proven successful in reducing my students' anxiety about speaking in public. Grounded in instructional implications and empirical research, this essay offers practical strategies for new and seasoned public speaking instructors to help their students face their speaking fears head-on and reduce their PSA.

Public Speaking Anxiety

Public Speaking Anxiety is a construct which extends from communication apprehension. McCroskey (1977) defined Communication Apprehension (CA) as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication

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with another person or persons" (p. 28). Communication Apprehension can take many forms including its most common component-- PSA (McCourt, 2007). Bodie (2010) defined PSA as "a situation-specific social anxiety that arises from the real or anticipated enactment of an oral presentation" (Bodie, 2010, p. 72). Research has suggested that 20 to 30 percent of students experience debilitating levels of speaking anxiety (McCroskey, 1977). Despite the significant presence of speaking anxiety, a vast amount of research has focused on mechanisms designed to reduce individuals' PSA. Below, I will describe three of the most common treatment methods and provide practical implications illustrating how PSA reduction can be incorporated into public speaking instruction.

Coping with Anxiety in the Classroom

Exposure Therapy

According to Finn, Sawyer, and Schrodt (2009) "graduated exposure involves presenting [students] with a threatening stimulus for short periods of time ranging from a few seconds to a few minutes, depending on the noxiousness of the stimulus" (p. 95). This type of anxiety treatment can be infused into course design by creating increasingly-challenging speaking experiences throughout the course. This type of "exposure" therapy is a critical element in building competence as well as confidence in public speaking (McCroskey, Ralph, & Barrick, 1970). Thus, structuring assignments which increase in length and difficulty over the semester can help reduce students' fear of public speaking. Start with short speeches using limited research requirements and build to more lengthy presentations with numerous resources. This technique allows students to progressively build their confidence over the course of a semester. Moreover, each time a student delivers a speech or discusses his or her topic, ideas, or source material with the instructor or other students, the student is utilizing this type of "repeated exposure" therapy. On presentation days, save enough time at the end of the lesson to allow the students to provide positive comments and critiques of one another. This type of exposure helps to diminish the negative connotations associated with public speaking. Exposure therapy is effective, and its impact can be maximized if used in conjunction with other techniques for reducing PSA, such as cognitive modification and skills training.

Cognitive Modification

Cognitive modification is based on the assumption that PSA manifests itself from negative or unfounded thoughts about public speaking (Allen, Hunter, & Donohue, 1989). Bodie (2010) asserts that "[cognitive modification] procedures attempt to replace problematic public speaking cognitions with more positive views of public speaking and the self as a public speaker" (p. 87). Although traditional cognitive modification requires a trained therapist (Glogower, Fremouw, & McCroskey, 1978), elements of this treatment technique can be included within a public speaking course. For example, instructors can teach their students to self-identify negative or irrational feelings about speaking anxiety and encourage the students to replace those thoughts with positive attitudes. Additionally, strengths-based instructor feedback on speech presentations can help eliminate students' negative perceptions of public speaking. Moreover, reading and discussing public

speaking anxiety can offer the students a new, positive perspective on public speaking. These elements of cognitive modification were successfully tested by Fremouw & Scott (1979). Additionally, Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield (2004) asserted that students should engage in "realistic thinking" that acknowledges the existence of anxiety and encourages students to view anxiety issues through a strengths-based perspective. For example instructors might say "although you indicated you were nervous, you were able to cope with your nervousness by providing clear organization and fluid delivery." Cognitive modification can be extended through instructor feedback by providing positive, supportive feedback with the performance evaluation. By identifying two or three strengths for each constructive comment or limitation, instructors can help build student confidence and increase students' perceptions of PSA.

Skills Training

Whitworth and Cochran (1996) posited that skills training "reduces the ambiguity of the public speaking situation by providing knowledge and techniques necessary for effective public speaking (p. 308). Skills training is the most commonly used form of PSA treatment (Robinson, 1997); yet this type of anxiety treatment is not as effective as exposure therapy or cognitive modification in terms of anxiety reduction (Allen et al., 1989). Nonetheless, developing speaking competence through skill development within the public speaking course is important to the reduction of PSA (Adler, 1980; Kelly, 1997). To decrease students' anxiety in the classroom instructors should utilize structured and unstructured assignments to allow flexibility for anxious and non-anxious students (Booth-Butterfield, 1986). Other skills-based techniques suggest the use of numerous short assignments (Beatty, 1988), dedicated work periods for speech development (Behnke & Sawyer, 2000), and creating opportunities for post-speech reflection (Witt et al., 2006). Moreover, I have found success through classroom discussion, textbook readings, and incrementally-increasing the level of difficulty for the assignments presented. The skills training techniques described above can provide significant assistance in increasing students' competence and decreasing their speaking anxiety.

When utilized together, exposure therapy, cognitive modification, and skills training can have a significant impact on anxiety reduction. Hunter, Westwick, and Haleta (2014) assessed the impact of this triangulated anxiety treatment and found a 10 percent decrease in students' PSA from the beginning of the course to the end of the course. Their findings illustrated that, through careful course development and design, it is possible to provide students with positive and challenging classroom experiences which aid in competency development and the reduction of speech anxiety. The PSA treatments described above have proved beneficial to public speaking instructors who sought to decrease their students' PSA through course design and meaningful student-learning experiences. For more information on the study by Hunter et al. (2014) visit http://www.natcom.org/CommCurrentsArticle.aspx?id=5014.

Assessment

Assessment is a critical component in measuring the effectiveness of our instructional practices (McCroskey, 2007) and can assist instructors who seek to improve their instructional methods (Morreale, Backlund, Hay, & Moore, 2011). Regardless of the pedagogical choices you make regarding student PSA reduction, it is necessary to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of those choices. There are numerous useful resources for assessing student growth and development related to public speaking and communication skill development. Hunter et al. (2014) utilized McCroksey's (1970) Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) which measures levels of speaking anxiety through a 34-item Likert-type instrument. There are many other instruments which can be utilized to measure PSA. Bodie (2010) provided a meta-analysis of PSA research, treatments and assessments. Many of these instruments described in the meta-analysis allow instructors to assess changes in speaking anxiety. Lastly, Morreale and Backlund (2007) reflected on many different types of assessment measures in *Large Scale Assessment in Oral Communication: K-12 and Higher Education*. Each of these resources will prove useful, not only to those with a vast amount of assessment experience, but to those who are looking to begin assessment of their course and student learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Helping students cope with their speaking anxiety remains a critical concern for K-12 and higher education communication instructors. Although there are many different strategies which can be used to reduce students' anxiety through a public speaking course, exposure therapy, cognitive modification, and skills training have proven to be successful through tested and validated empirical research. By incorporating these anxiety-reduction strategies into course design, instructors at all levels of instruction can provide a positive learning experience which reduces public speaking anxiety and develops students' communication competency. Regardless of whether you are new to the communication classroom or have many years of experience, the practical strategies discussed within this essay offer a refreshed lens through which instructors can extend opportunities for student success in their courses.

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