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Students' Perceived Usefulness and Relevance of Communication Skills in the Basic Course: Comparing University and Community College Students

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Extant literature clearly indicates the need for communication training in an undergraduate curriculum. For example, Boyer (1987) argues that the ability to write and speak with clarity as well as the capacity to read and listen with comprehension are requisites for students' success in college. In fact, all of the skills students learn in their areas of study may be rendered useless if they are not equipped with the ability to communicate competently (Donofrio & Davis, 1997). Additionally, Moyer and Hugenberg (1997) note that "all college and university accrediting agencies emphasize training in oral communication skills as central to a bonafide general education" (p. 1). It is in the introductory communication course that students are most likely to receive training in fundamental communication skills.

Several scholars have attempted to identify the communication skills students need in order to be suc-

cessful in their careers. For example, DiSalvo (1980) identified listening, writing, oral reporting, persuading, interpersonal, and small group problem solving as critical communication skills for entry-level positions. In a survey of 446 alumni of a required introductory communication course, Wolvin and Corley (1984) found interpersonal communication, listening, and small group communication to be among the most often utilized communication skills in various career fields. In a survey of employers, Willmington (1989) found listening variables ("understanding what others are saying" and "paying attention to what others are saying") to be the highest rated communication variables for career success. In addition, Sypher, Bostrom, and Seibert (1989) found that effective listeners hold higher level positions and are promoted more often than individuals who are not effective listeners. Similarly, Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle's (1997) research further substantiates that oral communication skills are necessary for success in the workplace. This literature clearly supports Wolvin's (1998) argument that the "workplace today requires skilled communicators who can function effectively at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and public communication levels" (p. 4).

Given the importance of communication skills training, researchers have sought to evaluate the efficacy of introductory courses in communication. For example, Bassett and Boone (1983) found that students can develop a wide range of verbal and nonverbal skills in the basic public speaking course. In a study of 393 students enrolled in a similar course, Ford and Wolvin (1992) found that the course had a positive effect on students' perceptions of their communication skills.

Bendtschneider and Trank (1990) surveyed basic course instructors, alumni, and students to determine the extent to which the communication skills alumni and students found most important were adequately addressed by the instructors in the basic course. Despite finding some differences between what was considered important and what was taught, they concluded overall that the institution's basic course did respond to students' communication needs. Finally, in studies of the impact of required introductory courses in communication on students' perceived communication competencies in class, work, and social contexts, Ford and Wolvin (1993) and Kramer and Hinton (1996) found significant improvements for all three contexts.

Continued exploration of the usefulness and relevance of the skills taught in basic communication courses is essential for a number of reasons. We agree with Bendtschneider and Trank's (1990) argument that "we need to ask which communication skills are important, useful, and relevant in producing effective and appropriate messages across a variety of situations" (p. 169). Such research is necessary if communication educators are to develop curricula that meet students' needs. As Ford and Wolvin (1992) note, faculty who design basic communication courses are not always in touch with students' communication needs. In addition, Hugenberg and Moyer (1997) argue that "faculty frequently rely on their own views of what communication skills should be taught undergraduates, with little regard to existing results in the literature" (pp. 3-4). In fact, Johnson and Szczupakiewicz (1987) found that faculty and alumni differed in their views of what public speaking skills were most important in the workplace.

Specifically, alumni ranked informative speaking, listening, and handling questions and answers as the top three skills, while faculty ranked informative speaking, persuasive speaking, and gathering supporting materials as the top three skills necessary to operate as a competent communicator. Clearly, communication scholars must develop an understanding of the skills their students perceive to be most useful and relevant to their future careers.

In attempting to evaluate whether the basic course fulfills students' communication needs, communication educators should devote considerable attention to the format of the course (i.e., public speaking, interpersonal communication, hybrid). According to Hugenberg (1996), the beginning public speaking course "has been and remains the most offered, the most taken, and the most popular basic course in communication" (p. 11). Despite the apparent popularity of this format, research has not demonstrated that the public speaking approach is the most effective (Seiler & McGukin, 1989). In fact, research indicates that many students and faculty perceive that interpersonal skills are at least as important as public speaking skills. For instance, Sorenson and Pearson (1981) surveyed alumni about the communication skills that they perceived to be most important to their job success. They found that interpersonal communication skills were deemed most important by respondents. Given these concerns, additional research which evaluates students' perceptions of public speaking and interpersonal skills is warranted.

It is important that research examining students' perceptions of communication skills not be limited to four-year institutions. In fact, community colleges have

become a popular option for many students. According to Schrof (1993), enrollment in community colleges has increased 23 percent nationwide since 1988. One reason for this trend may be that such institutions offer scheduling flexibility and occupation-oriented training which caters to “non-traditional” students as well as those re-tooling for new careers (Schrof, 1995). As a result, it is possible that students enrolled at a community college and those at a four-year institution may have different perceptions regarding the usefulness and relevance of the communication skills offered in the basic course. At a minimum, a better understanding of the perceptions of students enrolled in different types of institutions could contribute to a data base “from which to identify similarities and differences in students’ communication needs across institutions” (Bendtschneider & Trank, 1990, p. 188).

STUDY ONE

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine community college and university students’ perceptions of communication skills learned in a basic communication course in relation to their career choice. Further, since basic communication courses are often offered in two areas — public speaking and interpersonal communication, we were also interested to see if the different content areas might affect students’ perceptions.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide our investigation of students' perceived usefulness and relevance of communication skills:

- RQ₁: Do students perceive communication skills they learn in a basic communication course to be useful?
- RQ₂: Do students perceive communication skills they learn in a basic communication course to be relevant to their future career?
- RQ₃: Is there a difference between the perceptions of students enrolled in public speaking courses and those of students enrolled in interpersonal communication courses regarding the usefulness and relevance of communication skills and their future career?
- RQ₄: Is there a difference between the perceptions of students enrolled in a two-year community college and those of students enrolled in a four-year college regarding the usefulness and relevance of communication skills and their future career?

METHODS

Participants

Participants in Study 1 were 446 students (228 males, 215 females, 3 students did not identify their sex) enrolled in required basic courses in interpersonal

communication and public speaking. Two hundred ninety-one of the participants were from a large, four-year university, while 155 were from a medium sized community college. Participants from the four-year university were drawn from randomly selected sections of the basic communication course. Although the basic course at the four-year institution was a general education requirement for all students, it was offered in two formats (public speaking and interpersonal communication) and the students were allowed to enroll in the format of their choice. Participants from the community college were the entire population of students enrolled in the basic course at the institution. The basic course at the community college was also a general education requirement but was offered only in the public speaking format. Overall, the sample was divided almost equally among students enrolled in interpersonal communication ($n = 208$) and public speaking ($n = 238$).

Instrument

A 24-item questionnaire was developed for data collection. Items on the instrument consisted of both demographic-type questions (e.g., participant age, gender, class level) and opinion questions (e.g., perceived usefulness and relevance of communication skills). Factual data were collected through forced-choice scales and free-response scales, while opinion data were collected using Likert-type scales. Specifically, the instrument measured participants perceived usefulness of communication skills by ten, five-point, Likert-type scales (very useless to very useful). The ten communication skills (speaking, listening, self-presentation, non-

verbal communication, providing feedback, critical thinking, problem solving, language usage, cultural sensitivity, and group discussion) were derived from the stated course goals and texts used at the two institutions. Given that it is possible that students can perceive particular communication skills to be generally useful (i.e., worthwhile) but not relevant (i.e., applicable) to their future careers, the researchers also included a measure of relevance in the instrument. Perceived relevance was measured by four, five-point Likert-type scales (never to always) developed by Frymier and Shulman (1995) (see Figure 1). The instrument demonstrated high internal consistencies among items in this application. The scales measuring students' perceived usefulness and relevance of communication skills generated a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .91 and .82 respectively.

Figure 1
Relevance Scale

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1. The instructor uses examples to make course content relevant to your career goals.
 2. The instructor provides explanations that demonstrate the importance of the course content in relation to your career goals.
 3. The instructor explicitly states how course materials relate to your life in general.
 4. The instructor gives assignments that involve the application of the content to your career interests.
-

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Frequency distributions and *t*-tests were utilized to analyze the data. The .05 level of significance was established for all statistical tests.

Demographic Information

The median age of students enrolled at the four-year institution was 18, while that of the community college students was 19. The means were 19.8 and 23.5 respectively. The majority (95%) of students at the four-year university were single, while 65% at the community college were single and 31% reported being married. The respondents at the four-year university were more racially diverse: 73% Caucasian, 12% African American, 5% Asian, 4% biracial, 1% Hispanic, and 5% other. Respondents at the community college were predominately Caucasian (93%).

In terms of career related information, students' average length of previous employment was 4.97 years. Almost half of the respondents (199 or 45%) were not employed, while 183 respondents (43%) reported that they worked part-time. The majority of students surveyed at both institutions (71% at the four-year institution, 72% at the two-year institution) indicated that they knew what type of career they wanted to pursue. Three-fourths (75%) of the students reported that they were attending college to prepare themselves for their first career, while 11% indicated a desire to retool for a new career. Only 6% reported going to college for their own intellectual development.

Results

The first research question asked if students perceive communication skills they learn in a basic communication course to be useful. The ten-item perceived usefulness scale was employed to answer this question. Results indicate that the majority of students do perceive the communication skills taught in the basic course useful ($M = 4.33$). In terms of the ten specific skills, the majority of students ranked each skill as "useful" and "very useful:" 92% for listening, 87% for speaking, 85% for self-presentation, 83% for critical thinking, 83% for language, 80% for problem solving, 73% for group discussion, and 72% for cultural sensitivity.

The second research question asked if students perceive communication to be relevant to their future careers. The researchers analyzed results of the four-item relevance scale to answer this question. Results demonstrate that students do perceive that their instructors are making course material relevant to their career goals and interests ($M = 3.56$).

Research question three asked if public speaking students' perceptions of communication skills differ from interpersonal communication students' perceptions (see Table 1). In terms of the usefulness of communication skills, results indicate that students' perceptions do not differ significantly ($t(439) = -.37, p > .05$). In terms of the relevance variable, significant differences were found ($t(441) = -6.78, p < .05$). Specifically, students enrolled in interpersonal classes reported higher percep-

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tions of relevance ($M = 3.79$) than students enrolled in public speaking classes ($M = 3.28$).

Table 1
T-Test results for Differences in usefulness and Relevance as a Function of Course Type: Study One

| | Public Speaking | | | Interpersonal | | | <i>t</i> | <i>Df</i> |
|------------|-----------------|-----------|----------|---------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i> | | |
| Usefulness | 4.28 | .66 | 233 | 4.31 | .70 | 208 | -.37 | 439 |
| Relevance | 3.28 | .86 | 237 | 3.79 | .67 | 206 | -6.78* | 441 |

* $p < .05$.

Research question four asked if four-year university students' perceptions of the usefulness and relevance of communication skills differ from those of two-year community college students. In short, the researchers failed to find significant differences (see Table 2). Students at both institutions perceived the communication skills offered at both institutions to be useful ($M = 4.33$ for the four-year university students, $M = 4.23$ for the community college students) yielding a nonsignificant difference ($t(438) = 1.35$, $p > .05$). The students at both institutions also reported similar results in terms of the relevance of communication skills to their future careers with a mean of 3.56 for the four-year university students and 3.43 for their community college counterparts ($t(440) = 1.68$, $p > .05$).

Table 2
T-Test Results for Differences in Usefulness and Relevance as a Function of Institution: Study One

| | University | | | Community College | | | <i>t</i> | <i>Df</i> |
|------------|------------|-----------|----------|-------------------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i> | | |
| Usefulness | 4.33 | .65 | 288 | 4.23 | .72 | 152 | 1.35 | 438 |
| Relevance | 3.56 | .74 | 289 | 3.43 | .94 | 153 | 1.68 | 440 |

DISCUSSION

The data indicate that students perceive that the skills learned in required basic courses in interpersonal communication and public speaking are useful. Students also report that their instructors make the course material relevant to their future careers. Although students' perceptions of the usefulness and relevance of communication skills do not differ based on type of institution, students enrolled in interpersonal communication classes perceive their instructors to make course content more relevant to their future career than those enrolled in public speaking sections. It is possible that students in these courses perceive that public speaking skills are not work-related and/or not relevant outside of the context of the classroom. These findings will be explored in more detail in the following sections of this essay.

STUDY TWO

Using a pretest-posttest design, Study 2 extended the initial research project by examining whether students' perceptions changed over the duration of the course.

Research Questions

For Study 2, we asked the same first and second research questions as Study 1, and added the following question:

RQ₃: Do students' perceptions of the usefulness and relevance of communication skills in relation to their future career change significantly over the course of the semester?

Because of a change in the nature of the basic communication course offered at the four-year institution (from public speaking and interpersonal communication to a hybrid course), Study 2 only surveyed students from the community college to retain consistency with Study 1.

Participants

Participants in Study 2 were 205 students (92 males, 113 females) enrolled in a required basic public speaking course at a medium-sized community college. As with Study 1, these participants were the entire population of students enrolled in the basic communication course at the institution.

Instrument

The researchers utilized the same 24-item questionnaire for Study 2 that was developed for Study 1. Participants completed the instrument in the second and twelfth week of the semester. This procedure allowed for pre- and posttest comparisons to determine if results changed as a function of the course. The scales measuring students' perceived usefulness and relevance of communication skills generated a Cronbach's alpha reliability of .93 and .85 respectively.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Frequency distributions and *t*-tests were employed to analyze the data and the .05 level of significance was established for all statistical tests.

Demographic Information

Although the median age of students in Study 2 (19) was the same as Study 1, the mean was lower from the previous year (22.7). Seventy-four percent of the students reported that they were single, 19% reported being married, and 6% reported that they were divorced. Respondents at the community college were predominantly Caucasian (98%).

In terms of career related information, the majority of students (78%) reported that they knew what type of career they wanted while 17% reported that they were unsure. In addition, the previous job experience of the community college students in Study 2 averaged 5.5

years; the majority of them (56%) indicated that they worked part-time while attending school. Consistent with Study 1, 76% of the respondents indicated that they attended college in order to prepare for their first career, followed by career retooling (17%), and current job advancement (3%).

Results

The first research question asked if students perceive communication skills to be useful. The results indicate that, for both the pre- ($M = 4.27$) and posttests ($M = 4.30$), students perceive the communication skills offered in the basic public speaking course are useful.

Research question two asked if students perceive communication skills to be relevant in terms of their future career. Again, results indicate that students perceive their instructors are making course content relevant to their future careers for both the pre- ($M = 3.62$) and posttests ($M = 3.80$). However, it is important to note that the results suggest higher perceptions of usefulness than relevance.

The third research question asked if perceptions of usefulness and relevance change significantly over the course of the semester. For the usefulness variable, results do not indicate significant differences between the second and twelfth weeks of the semester ($t(368) = -.38$, $p > .05$). However, significant results were discovered in terms of the relevance variable ($t(361) = 2.36$, $p < .05$) (See Table 3). Specifically, participants reported higher perceptions of relevance at the end of the semester ($M_1 = 3.62$, $M_2 = 3.80$).

Table 3
T-Test Results for Differences in usefulness and Relevance as a Function of Time: Study Two

| | Time One | | | Time Two | | | <i>t</i> | <i>Df</i> |
|------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>n</i> | | |
| Usefulness | 4.27 | .71 | 197 | 4.30 | .78 | 173 | -.38 | 368 |
| Relevance | 3.62 | .70 | 193 | 3.80 | .76 | 170 | .236* | 361 |

* $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the findings presented in Study 1, the data indicate that students perceive that the skills learned in the basic public speaking course are useful and relevant in relation to their future career. The data analyzed in Study 2 also suggest that there was an increase in students' perceptions of relevance over the course of the semester; however, the students' already high-rated perceptions of the usefulness of communication skills did not change significantly. These results are significant for a number of reasons. The fact that students' perceptions of relevance became more positive over time can be at least partially attributed to their participation in the basic public speaking course. Also, students clearly perceive that the skills taught in the basic course are valuable in the workplace.

OVERALL CONSIDERATIONS

Taken together, the results of these two studies provide evidence to substantiate the claim that students

perceive the communication skills taught in basic interpersonal communication and public speaking courses to be useful and relevant for their future career. Importantly, these findings were consistent for both university and community college students. In addition, students' perceptions of the relevance of communication skills taught in the basic public speaking course were found to change in a positive direction over time. Despite the significant positive findings presented in Study 2, the research design prohibits us from claiming that changes in students' perceptions were solely a function of the basic course. Specifically, the lack of a control group prevents us from knowing whether students enrolled in other courses may have experienced the same changes as those enrolled in the basic course. However, the results are of significant value to communication educators looking to corroborate the value of skills offered in the basic public speaking course.

The results also elucidate important concerns for communication educators in terms of the format of the basic course. As noted previously, the beginning public speaking course is among the most popular basic courses in communication. However, the results of the present study reveal that students enrolled in the basic interpersonal communication course report higher perceptions of relevance than those enrolled in the basic public speaking course. It seems reasonable to speculate that students view public speaking skills as less directly relevant to their future careers compared to interpersonal skills. This line of thinking is consistent with Bendtschneider and Trank's (1990) findings that students and alumni rate interpersonal skills as more important than their instructors. Extant research also in-

dicates that training in interpersonal communication is at least as important to career success as training in public speaking (Sorenson & Pearson, 1981).

The data presented here contribute to an emerging body of research suggesting that pedagogy in the basic course should extend beyond a strict focus on public speaking. As Hugenberg (1996) notes, "Teaching communication skills in the interpersonal, group, interviewing, public speaking, and other communication contexts seems a good starting point for the student taking only one communication course. Focusing on just public speaking skills leaves out many other important communication contexts" (p. 1). An obvious alternative to the basic public speaking course is the hybrid course. According to Moyer and Hugenberg (1997), the "course best suited to establish the foundations of communication competence for undergraduate students is the hybrid course" (p. 12). Communication educators should consider the hybrid format because it can be designed to provide students with an optimal mix of communication competencies in multiple contexts including public speaking, group communication, and interpersonal communication.

In sum, communication skills training will continue to play a vital role in the education of undergraduate students. In order to extend current understandings of the usefulness and relevance of communication skills, future research should examine the skills employers deem most important in relation to specific careers. In addition, research is needed which demonstrates that students' communication skills change as a function of their enrollment in the basic course. Such information could prove valuable in meeting the needs of various ac-

creditation agencies and improve educators' abilities to tailor the basic course to students' specific learning needs and career interests.

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