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Predictors of Self-Perceptions of Behavioral Competence, Self-Esteem, and Willingness to Communicate: A Study Assessing Impact in a Basic Interpersonal Communication Course

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Recent national conferences and other scholarly writings have called attention to the importance of oral communication competency and its assessment (Backlund, 1990; McCroskey, 1982; Morreale, Berko, Brooks & Cooke, 1994; Pearson & Daniels, 1988; Rubin, 1990; Spitzberg, 1993). Communication scholars have focused on developing criteria, methods, models and instruments for assessment (Hay, 1992; Littlejohn & Jabusch, 1982; Morreale & Backlund, 1996; Rubin, 1982; Speech Communication Association, 1993; Spitzberg, 1983; Spitzberg, 1995; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989). At the state and regional level, understanding and assessing oral competency has become increasingly important, with a focus on accreditation for colleges and universities (Allison, 1994; Chesebro, 1991; Litterst, Van Rheenen & Casmir, 1994).

Considering these trends, a need exists to develop and test methods for assessing competency in specific courses taught within the communication discipline. Earlier studies have explored assessment in the public speaking course. Ellis (1995) examined students' self perceptions of apprehension and competency and their perceptions of

teacher immediacy behaviors. Morreale, Hackman & Neer (1995) analyzed predictors of behavioral competence and self-esteem in a public speaking course. Rubin, Rubin and Jordan (1997) examined the effects of classroom instruction on students' levels of communication apprehension and their self-perceived communication competence in a basic course that included public speaking theory and practice. In addition to public speaking, another basic course of importance to the discipline is interpersonal communication (Gibson, Hanna, & Leichty, 1990). The present study describes an assessment program/process for the interpersonal communication course. This program utilizes a pre- and post-testing process to evaluate value-added dimensions of the course. This study is intended to:

1. examine the use of a course design that incorporates an assessment program in the interpersonal communication course;
2. explore the use of a pre- and post-test process and existing instruments for addressing program and course assessment; and,
3. provide an example of how the results of the assessment process can be interpreted and used by a communication department or program.

This article first describes the design and theoretical base of the interpersonal communication course where data were gathered for the present study. Then the course's assessment procedures for laboratory-based, pre- and post-assessment interviews are described. Results are presented summarizing the impact of the course on undergraduates' perceptions of behavioral competence, self-esteem, and willingness to communicate, as a function of their gender age and ethnicity.

COURSE DESIGN AND THEORETICAL BASE

Oral competency and communication training and development have been frequently related to the students' academic and professional success (Curtis, Winsor & Stephens, 1989; Ford & Wolvin, 1993; Rubin & Graham, 1988; Rubin, Graham & Mignerey, 1990; Vangelisti & Daly, 1989). To support students' development of oral competency, the interpersonal course described in this study is based on a theoretical model for communication competence articulated within the discipline and described below (Littlejohn & Jabusch, 1982; Shockley-Zalabak, 1992; Spitzberg, 1983). In addition, individualized instruction and personalized relationships with students are made possible utilizing the support of graduate teaching assistants in an individualized assistance laboratory setting (Seiler & Fuss-Reineck, 1986).

Course Description

Structurally, the course utilizes a lecture/laboratory instructional model. Students interact with the laboratory staff and use multimedia materials to supplement the traditional classroom approach to instruction. In addition to attending weekly lectures, all students have access to and are required to utilize the communication laboratory to satisfy a series of course requirements. The course design includes an entrance and an exit interview for each student. The entrance interview, scheduled during the first three weeks of the term, is conducted by a graduate teaching assistant and consists of setting personal goals for the course and assessing students' self-perceived communication behaviors, self-esteem, and willingness to communicate. The exit interview, scheduled during the final three weeks of the term, consists of reviewing personal

course goals, administering the same instruments as in the entrance interview, and discussing the course's final paper. Both the entrance and the exit interview are course requirements for all students. Additionally each student is required to participate, at some time during the semester, in a minimum of two other lab-based training modules, workshops, or individual assistance programs.*

Theoretical Base

A review of the literature on communication competency suggests a composite model of competence should include and focus on four dimensions or domains: cognition, behaviors, affect, and ethics. In the course described herein, specific objectives and criteria for assessment in each domain are articulated for students as follows:

Cognitive Domain. The student will be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the theories and concepts related to interpersonal communication.

The cognitive domain involves learning about the communication process and the elements involved in a communication event. Attendance at and participation in all lectures is expected for students to gain competence in this domain. Students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through three in-class objective exams and a written final exam administered at the end of the course.

Behavioral Domain. The student will be able to demonstrate improvement in interpersonal behaviors and communication skills related to the interpersonal process. The behavioral domain includes both abilities possessed by the communicator and observable skills or behaviors. Students demonstrate improved interpersonal communication skills

* A copy of the syllabus used in the course described in this study can be obtained by writing: Dr. Michael Hackman, Department of Communication, University of Colorado-Colorado Springs, Colorado Springs, CO 80933-7150.

through participation in in-class experiential learning activities and involvement in two workshops scheduled during regular class time. Also, students are pre- and post-tested during entrance and exit interviews regarding their self-perceptions of behavioral competence. In the exit interview, they demonstrate interpersonal behavioral competence in an oral dyadic discussion of their final paper.

Affective Domain. The student will demonstrate improvement in how he or she feels about his or her self as an interpersonal communicator.

The affective domain encompasses the communicator's feelings, attitudes, motivation, and willingness to communicate. Students are pre- and post-tested during entrance and exit interviews regarding their self-esteem and willingness to communicate, both self-report indicators of how the student feels about self as an interpersonal communicator.

Ethical Domain. The student will demonstrate a set of personal ethics in regard to interpersonal communication.

The ethical domain consists of the communicator's ability and willingness to take moral responsibility for the outcome of the communication event. Students demonstrate the development of a set of interpersonal communication ethics by writing their own interpersonal ethics statement. The ethics statement is developed by the student based on his or her own experiences in life and reactions to course lecture material and other selected readings on ethics available in the laboratory.

METHOD

Research Design

The present study utilized a pre- and post-testing process to evaluate value-added dimensions of the interpersonal communication course. Despite threats to internal

validity raised by the use of such a process and design, regional accreditation agencies recently have begun to laud this method, calling it a neglected concept and practice in many departmental assessment programs (Lopez, 1995). The results of pre- and post-testing are now considered useful benchmarks for measuring learning from entry to exit and for evaluating value-added aspects of a course or program.

Participants

Subjects were 306 undergraduate students enrolled in a lower division interpersonal communication course at a mid-sized urban commuter university in the western United States from 1993-1996.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- RQ1: What impact will gender, age, and ethnicity have on changes in students' self-perceptions of their behavioral competence?
- RQ2: What impact will gender, age, and ethnicity have on changes in students' level of self-esteem?
- RQ3: What impact will gender, age, and ethnicity have on changes in students' level of willingness to communicate?

The predictor variables (gender, age, ethnicity) were selected in order to determine whether the laboratory-supported course described in this article impacts all students similarly regardless of their biological sex, chronological age, or their ethnicity. An important consideration in the selection of age, gender and ethnicity is an argument put forth by Fitzpatrick (1993) and Kramarae (1992) that communication scholars have demonstrated a shocking

disregard for the potential impact of these variables. They suggest that these variables, as well as several contextual factors, are often central to the building of shared social realities based on similar life experiences.

The three research questions related to changes in students' self-perceptions of their behavioral competence, self-esteem, and willingness to communicate were evaluated using multiple regression. Thus, the data reported in this study relate to only the affective domain of learning in this interpersonal-based laboratory course. Predictor variables were gender (female=207, male=99), age (mean=25.85, sd=10.22), and ethnicity (Anglo=249, non-Anglo=57). Measurement, or outcome, variables were self-perceptions of communication behaviors, self-esteem, and willingness to communicate. These outcome variables were selected because they were believed to be among the most likely variables to be impacted by the interpersonal course.

Data Collection and Interview Process

As indicated earlier, assessment instruments were administered in the communication laboratory during entrance and exit interviews conducted by graduate teaching assistants. The interviews were held during the first and final three weeks of the term. The same instruments were administered in both interviews. The one-hour interviews were conducted by TAs trained to administer the selected tools to students. TAs attended pre-semester training and weekly meetings during the term focusing on administering and interpreting the tools. The same TA conducted the pre- and post-interviews with each student. During the entrance interview, pretest scores were used to indicate strengths and weaknesses that the student should consider during the course. Also, students set personal goals for the course. During the exit interview, students reviewed and discussed changes between their pre- and post-test scores.

Students also submitted a final paper at the exit interview and discussed the paper and the personal goals set earlier. The final paper was a synthesis of everything the student had learned in the course, reflecting on personal goals set and accomplished. To assure confidentiality and encourage honesty in completing the assessment tools, students were informed that the classroom instructors did not have access to student scores, nor did the scores affect their grade in any way.

Measurement Instruments

The following instruments were administered to students in both the pre- and post-interviews: the Communication Behaviors Inventory (CBI; Morley, Morreale, & Naylor, 1993); the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965); and the Willingness to Communicate (WTC; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). These scales were selected based on widespread acceptance in the literature and their consistent reliability and validity.

Behavioral Competence. Self-report of communication behaviors was measured with the Communication Behaviors Inventory (CBI; Morley, Morreale & Naylor, 1993) which identifies communication behaviors and behavioral predispositions that would predict positive student outcomes. The instrument was developed and tested for use in the communication lab, based on the behavior-analytic model of Goldfried and D'Zurilla (1969). This 93-item, 7-step, Likert-type scale assesses a student's self-perceptions or predispositions to behave in regard to five factors, identified as important communication situations or interactions for students at a four-year college or university (communication with faculty and staff, sensitivity to others, communication with different people, public speaking apprehension, and fight or flight). In the current study, alpha

reliabilities were .77 for the pre-test and .75 for the post-test.

Self Esteem. Self-report of esteem was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965). This 10-item, 4-step Likert-type scale has been used extensively in psychological research. In this study, the RSE scale revealed an alpha co-efficient of .78 with the pre-administration and an alpha coefficient of .76 with the post-administration.

Willingness to Communicate. Students' willingness to communicate was assessed using the Willingness to Communicate Scale (WTC; McCroskey & Richmond, 1987). This instrument is designed to measure an individual's predisposition toward approaching or avoiding the initiation of communication. The WTC is a 20-item probability estimate scale made up of 12 items which comprise the measure and 8 items which are fillers. The 12 items on the scale assess an individual's willingness to communicate in four contexts (public speaking, meeting, group, and dyad) and with three types of receivers (stranger, acquaintance, and friend). In the current study, alpha reliabilities were .92 for the pre-test and .93 for the post-test.

DATA ANALYSES

Analyses consisted of multiple regression between the predictors and the dependent measures. The predictors were dummy-coded and entered in the regression model as dichotomous variables, with the exception of respondent age which was entered as a continuous variable. A second set of regression analyses was conducted with pre-scores on the dependent measures also entered as predictors of post-scores. Additional analysis consisted of paired t-tests with each sub-sample of the three predictors to determine mean differences and strength of relationship between pre- and post- scores on the dependent measure. Analysis of

Covariance (ANCOVA) also was conducted between the predictor variables and the measurement variables to determine whether the predictor variables would predict post-scores when controlling for pre-scores. Participant age was recast as a dichotomous variable at the median split (age 22 and younger vs. age 23 and older).

RESULTS

Non-mediated results revealed that students enrolled in the laboratory-intensive approach to basic interpersonal communication experienced significant gains in perceived self-esteem (Pre-mean = 33.12, SD = 4.90, Post-mean = 34.72, SD = 4.10, $r = .61$, t -value = 8.78, $p < .01$), perceived willingness to communicate (Pre-mean = 73.37, SD = 24.25, Post-mean = 80.09, SD = 14.74, $r = .29$, t -value = 4.49, $p < .02$), and perceived behavioral communication competence (Pre-mean = 3.18, SD = .83, Post-mean = 3.57, SD = .95, $r = .58$, t -value = 8.20, $p < .01$).

Test of Research Questions

RQ1 examined the impact of age, gender, and ethnicity on self-perceptions of behavioral communication competence. Regression revealed that all three variables failed to predict behavioral competence ($R = .09$, $F = .83$ (3,279), $p < .42$). Table 1 reports zero-order correlations between the predictors and dependent measures.

RQ2 examined the influence of age, ethnicity, and respondent age on perceived self-esteem. Regression demonstrated that none of the predictors impacted on self-esteem ($R = .09$, $F = .78$ (3,279), $p < .50$). Table 1 reports zero-order correlations between the predictors and self-esteem.

RQ3 investigated whether age, gender, and ethnicity would impact upon perceived willingness to communicate. Findings revealed that none of the predictors impacted on

willingness to communicate ($R = .05$, $F = .23$ (3,289), $p < .57$). Table 1 reports zero-order correlations between the predictors and willingness to communicate.

Table 1
Correlations For Gain Scores

	Gain in Esteem	Gain in Willing- ness	Gain in Compe- tence
Post-Esteem	.33	.03	.20
Post-Willingness	.02	.26	.19
Post-Competence	.10	.02	.50
Pre-Esteem	.41	.04	.08
Pre-Willingness	.08	.54	.06
Pre-Competence	.08	.16	.39
Age	.01	.05	.04
Gender	.04	.03	.02
Ethnicity	.05	.03	.10

Note: correlations above .16 ($p < .05$ and above .39 ($p < .01$))

Relationship Among Test Variables

Regression was conducted a second time with post scores for the three dependent measures; in this model, however, in addition to the three predictors, pre-scores on the three dependent measures were entered as predictors. As zero-order correlations in Table 2 indicate, post-scores were best predicted by pre-scores of each measure. Additionally, gain scores were significantly, although only moderately, inter-correlated. For instance, the self-esteem gain score was significantly correlated with the behavioral communication competence gain score. The willingness to

communicate gain score was significantly correlated with the behavioral competence gain score. Only the self-esteem gain score and the willingness to communicate gain score were not significantly correlated. Examination of zero-order correlations in Table 2 further demonstrated that post scores on each dependent measure were best predicted by their own pre-scores.

ANCOVA revealed that the predictor variables were unable to predict post-scores when controlling for the effects of pre-scores. For instance, significance was observed with ethnicity on behavioral competence post-scores (Anglo Post-mean = 17.03, Non-anglo Post-mean = 18.46, $F(1,344) = 9.30$, $p < .02$, $d = .04$). However, when pre-scores for behavioral competence were entered as covariates (Anglo Pre-mean = 15.26, Non-anglo Pre-mean = 17.13), ANCOVA revealed that the behavioral competence pre-score ($MR = .62$, $F(1,328) = 186.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .38$) removed ethnicity from the equation ($F = 2.92$, $p < .09$, $\text{power} = .55$).

Table 2
Correlation For Pre- and Post-Scores

	E1	E2	W1	W2	C1	C2
Age (A)	.03	.02	.01	.01	.13	.13
Gender (G)	-.15	-.17	.09	.06	.13	.11
Ethnicity (E)	.07	.07	.02	.05	-.13	.08
Pre-Esteem (E1)		.72	.24	.24	.40	.30
Post-Esteem (E2)			.23	.26	.36	.40
Pre-Willing (W1)				.63	.35	.27
Post-Willing (W2)					.26	.35
Pre-Comp (C1)						.59
Post-Comp (C2)						

Note: correlations above .16 ($p < .05$) and above .39 ($p < .01$)

Similar findings were observed with the remaining ANCOVA models and will not be tabled because they confirm findings for regression.

DISCUSSION

Findings in this study confirm that a laboratory-centered basic interpersonal course which emphasizes interaction between student and laboratory staff significantly impacts on perceived gains in self-esteem, willingness to communicate, and behavioral communication competence. However, as simple correlations indicate, gain or change scores were best predicted by both pre- and post-scores. Furthermore, non-mediated results show that the predictor variables do not predict gain scores. These findings may be interpreted to mean that what one brings to the course predicts how one leaves the course.

This interpretation, however, does not account for the significant gains that participants reported on all three dependent measures. The fact that the predictors failed to mediate findings should, indeed, be interpreted as a positive finding because it demonstrates that the course impacts favorably on all students. Thus, findings in this study are encouraging if viewed in this light. The literature referenced earlier indicates that academic, personal, and professional success are linked to communication competence. A course that favorably impacts all students on several communication variables is a valuable course. Indeed, a university's decision to increase funding for a course may, in part, be tied to a department's ability to structure a course that does not discriminate by gender, ethnicity, and age.

University administrators may prefer the more narrow reporting of non-mediated findings, especially when reviewing data from many different courses. Communication educators, on the other hand, are more broadly concerned

with identifying variables that impact on the learning process of students. While the variables tested in this study did not impact on the learning experience, additional variables should be assessed for their impact. Two of the most obvious candidates for study include trait anxiety and state anxiety. Each of these variables has been demonstrated to impact on oral performance and other aspects of the learning experience and it should be determined if either variable mediates the impact of the laboratory-centered approach to interpersonal instruction. Examination of situational factors contributing to both trait and state-anxiety also may prove useful candidates for examination, particularly since the laboratory-centered approach is designed to minimize discomfort and evaluation apprehension while increasing task familiarity and acquaintance level among students.

Until these variables are examined, we may now only conclude that students who complete the interpersonal laboratory course generally experience significant gains in the three areas of affective learning tested in this study. The inclusion of additional predictors in future studies may very well temper this conclusion. In fact, when pre-scores were defined as covariates of post-scores, we may further conclude that affective learning is better predicted by students' initial perceptions of their self-esteem, willingness to communicate, and behavioral competence when entering the course than by their age, gender, and ethnicity. Because we believe that the laboratory approach designed for this course provides the best instruction possible for all students, a control group was not tested for comparison so that all students may benefit from the same instruction. Nevertheless, future studies should attempt to determine which aspects of the laboratory design yield the greatest impact. Potential aspects for testing might include the quality of the interpersonal and professional relationship between lab staff and student, size of class, and self-

insights that students generate in their interpersonal ethics paper. Examining specific instructional components of the course may be particularly useful in helping to determine whether the positive affect they may produce offsets any negative affect produced by both trait anxiety and state anxiety. We might predict, for instance, that an effective interpersonal relationship between lab staff and student may moderate evaluation apprehension. This may appear to represent conventional wisdom; future research, however, should confirm (or reject) whether this is the case.

In addition to identifying a wider range of predictor variables, future studies also should examine a wider range of dependent measures. For instance, we would expect that students who report increased esteem and willingness to communicate to also report an increase in perceptions of the effectiveness of their communication behaviors. Several communication measures exist to test whether quality of communication increases as self-esteem and willingness to communicate increase. For instance, interaction involvement (Cegala, Savage, Bruner & Conrad, 1982) and rhetorical sensitivity (Hart & Burks, 1972) are but two of many such instruments that have accumulated supportive data bases. Norton's (1978) Communicator Style Inventory also would be an appropriate measure to consider because of its emphasis on how people perceive they enact communication behaviors.

Finally, the pre- post-test design used in this study could be augmented to assess all four domains of competence included in the theoretical model that is the foundation of the course. Presently, the Communication Behaviors Inventory assesses students' perceptions in the behavioral domain of competence, but not the performance of those behaviors. The assessment of self-esteem and willingness to communicate are both subsumed in the affective domain. The assessment program for the course could be

augmented to include pre- and post-testing of students' achievement in both the cognitive and ethical domains of competence.

Despite the shortcomings of the present study, a first step has been taken in describing the impact of a laboratory-centered interpersonal course on increasing perceived self-esteem, willingness to communicate, and behavioral communication competence. This study has ruled out three sociographic variables as predictors (age, ethnicity and gender), thus showing that the interpersonal laboratory does not discriminate among students on these variables. Additional variables must be identified as candidates for future testing in order to establish whether they provide a filter through which students' learning experience is processed. Identifying both predictor and dependent variables may eventually yield more discriminating mean differences and regression coefficients than those observed in this study. Because the interpersonal laboratory tested in this study has impacted positively on students, perhaps the best test of its impact may lie in examining specific instructional components of the lab. Recent national surveys (Curtis, Winsor & Stephens, 1989) have confirmed the importance of interpersonal competence in the workplace. A laboratory-centered approach to interpersonal instruction, when compared to a non-laboratory instructional approach, may perform a central role in developing students' interpersonal competencies.

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