Basic Communication Course Annual

Volume 29 Article 6

2017

A Blended Basic Course Examination of Communication Apprehension and Self-Efficacy: A Comparative Analysis

Michael G. Strawser
Bellarmine University

Amy. L. Housley Gaffney
Hamilton College

Allyson DeVito
University of Kentucky

Sarah E. Kercsmar
University of Kentucky

Michael Pennell
University of Kentucky

Research Article

A Blended Basic Course Examination of Communication Apprehension and Self-Efficacy: A Comparative Analysis

Michael G. Strawser, Bellarmine University
Amy L. Housley Gaffney, Hamilton College
Allyson DeVito, University of Kentucky
Sarah E. Kercsmar, University of Kentucky
Michael Pennell, University of Kentucky

Abstract

Students desire rich subject-matter and relevant pedagogy despite rising tuition costs, greater demands for flexibility, and unique learning preferences (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Donnelly, Rizvi, & Summers, 2013; Reed & Sork, 2009; Moore, 2007). As higher education modalities have evolved a careful examination of these newer approaches is necessary. This study is a comparative assessment of communication apprehension and self-efficacy of students in traditional (face-to-face) and blended (face-to-face and online instructional components) basic course modalities. Parallel sections of a basic communication course are assessed and results indicated no significant differences between the two groups with minor exceptions.

Keywords: basic communication course, blended learning, communication apprehension, self-efficacy

Students today expect subject-matter content and pedagogical practices to be relevant, practical, and tailored to address their preferred learning styles (Moore, 2007). Universities have attempted to address these challenges, and others (like accessible curricula, demands of flexible classes, and rising costs), through unique initiatives (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Donnelly, Rizvi, & Summers, 2013; Reed & Sork, 2009). As higher education has morphed, an examination of these newer approaches in an effort to better understand the effects on learning is necessary (Kim, 2011).

Blended learning, which will be discussed in more detail in the review of literature, offers several instructional benefits. The unique capabilities of blended course design can address challenges of the basic course which continues to transition to address the needs of the 21st-century student. Students are not one-dimensional communicators and scholars should continue to explore distance delivery systems for the basic course (Goodnight & Wallace, 2005; Valenzano III, Wallace, Morreale, 2014). The adaptation of the basic course, in light of new student demographics and the growth of online communication (Kirkwood, Gutgold, & Manley, 2011), should be an area of primary concern for basic course instructors and administrators.

In this paper, we answer such calls through an assessment of parallel sections of a basic communication course. While the course is typically taught in face-to-face courses that meet on campus, our university has also moved to include more blended styles (which incorporated online and face-to-face instructional components) of classes that bridge the gap between face-to-face and fully distance courses. In making educated decisions about offering such courses, we sought to assess specific learning outcomes regarding apprehension and self-efficacy in both modalities.

Course design

In Fall 2011, a large Southeastern university revised the basic course by combining the basic oral communication course and basic writing course to create the basic composition and communication two-course sequence. The first course became known as Composition and Communication I (CIS/WRD 110) and focused on integrated oral, written, and visual skills. Composition and Communication II (CIS/WRD 111) is the second course in the sequence. In Fall 2015, instructors developed a blended version of Composition and Communication II.

Composition and Communication II (i.e., CIS 111) highlights multimodal communication. In CIS 111, students worked together in small groups to explore issues of public concern using rhetorical analysis. Additionally, students engaged in

deliberation, composed conscientious and well-developed arguments, and proposed viable solutions to different audiences. Students also sharpened their ability to conduct research and work effectively in teams through sustained interrogation of an issue. Pinpoint instruction on visual and digital resources to enhance presentations and to communicate with public audiences was also provided.

The course was assigned a Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule. The three meetings per week differed in course modality. Students met online every week during one course session, one day students met face-to-face and, finally, one day students met through a virtual meeting space. Assignments were explained online and student questions were answered during face-to-face meetings. Content delivery was removed from the face-to-face setting thus allowing in-person class time to center on experiential learning and hands-on activities.

To accomplish a synchronous virtual experience, instructors used Adobe Connect to create group meeting rooms where students could control their learning space. Students were able to videoconference with other group members, IT support, and the instructor. Adobe Connect also allowed for textual, chat-based interaction as well as live visual and voice interaction amongst students and the instructor. Google Docs was used to accomplish peer review and collaboration. This innovative basic course redesign was a product of substantial blended instruction research and, after course assessment revealed minimal course structure distinctions in terms of student learning, course developers were pleased with the results and with the blended learning format.

Review of literature

Blended course design is unique and can be used to take advantage of new technologies (McLester, 2011). As a matter of clarification, blended courses provide a combination of online and in-person instruction and engagement activities (Rydeen, 2011), thus integrating online with face-to-face instruction in a planned and pedagogically sound manner (Niemiec & Otte, 2005). Specifically, the onus is not on adding online activities to face-to-face instruction but rather on replacing face-to-face time with online activities (Niemiec & Otte, 2005). Blended learning is one effective modality not just because of classroom flexibility, but also because of the opportunity it provides to match appropriate learning tasks through the integration of face-to-face verbal and online text-based exchanges (Vaughan & Garrison, 2005). As a result, instructors using mixed-modalities can reach students with a variety of learning style preferences through innovative teaching methods, and such

approaches have increased steadily in population in recent years (McGee & Reis, 2012). An estimated 79% of public higher education institutions now offer blended or hybrid courses (McGee & Reis, 2012). If implemented effectively, a blended course seems to offer a balanced approach by blending traditional and online learning options. We believe this modality can, and should, be used in the basic communication course.

The blended learning format is a flexible modality that offers many instructional benefits (Stein & Graham, 2014). For one, learners want to go beyond content comprehension, which has been the key learning outcome focus in many traditional classroom settings. Today, learners want to engage with and apply the knowledge they are gaining. Blended learning presents an opportunity for unique content application and situates learning experiences either online or onsite based on the strengths and weaknesses of each format for achieving the learning goals (Jones, 2012; Stein & Graham, 2014). Additionally, blended learning even enhances communities of inquiry while developing higher order thinking in students (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Thus, the blended learning format is a flexible modality that may offer numerous benefits.

21st-century learners are motivated by courses that address the communication needs of the modern student (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). This modern student desires control, choice, and technology during their educational endeavors (International Education Advisory Board, 2009). Blended learning is uniquely suited to combine the benefits of the traditional classroom with the flexibility reserved for online courses. As students become increasingly inaccessible in terms of time and financial flexibility, blended learning can reach these students by using the strengths of both traditional and hybrid classrooms (Wahlstrom, Williams, & Shea, 2003; Moore, 2007; Allen & Seaman, 2014).

In an effort to more effectively reach the 21st-century student, the basic course can be used as a platform to expand blended instructional strategy. Specifically, it can serve as a laboratory for new instructional practices especially in the computer age (Valenzano III, Wallace, & Morreale, 2014; Kirkwood, Gutgold, & Manley, 2011). There has been an increase in the use of media and technology in the basic course and institutions have progressively explored eLearning options to expand basic course offerings (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006; Morreale et al., 2010).

Many communication programs across the country now offer the basic course via multiple delivery formats (Morreale et al., 2010; National Communication Association, 2014). The number of institutions offering the basic course via distance

learning is likely to continue to grow as more user friendly instructional technology platforms become available (Morreale et al., 2006; Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016). The modalities for basic courses include traditional, interactive via tv cable, online, and blended learning (Morreale et al., 2016). Currently, only 28.7% of four-year schools (57.1% of two-year schools) use a blended/hybrid format for basic course instruction (Morreale et al., 2016). If the basic course is going to be taught in these online and blended/hybrid formats, then basic course instructors and administrators should make assessment of the courses an ongoing priority.

While blended learning is a worthy approach, transitioning the basic course into greater availability through distance learning is not without challenges. In previous studies, instructors indicated several challenges including managing mass-media channels, achieving sufficient levels of teacher immediacy and student-student interaction, as well as the lack of access and training for online instruction (Morreale et al., 2006; Morreale et al., 2016). In light of these challenges, several questions related to student success, retention, and degree completion arise (Allen, 2006). Despite such questions, students want online and blended options (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Thus, it behooves communication scholars to create pedagogically sound distance learning basic course options based on solid, evidence-based empirical research.

In order to ensure quality instruction, faculty and administrators should implement adequate course assessment measures to compare learning in traditional and distance courses. Assessment is a crucial component of instructional design. The implementation and ongoing assessment of distance education is central to the success of courses and programs (Hugenberg & Hugenberg, 2007). Backlund and Wakefield (2010) believe that assessment done effectively can improve the quality of learning if the ultimate purpose is instructional improvement. McCroskey and McCroskey (2006) also argue that we "need statistically significant and socially meaningful research that focuses on the integration of media technologies in existing systems and how this integration enhances student learning" (p. 42). Necessary data can be gathered through assessment.

Such assessment research must focus on what instructors want students to learn and then employ sound research methods to measure the degree to which students are learning those concepts and skills. What follows is a comparative assessment of communication apprehension and self-efficacy of students in traditional (face-to-face) and blended basic course modalities.

Apprehension

One component of teaching communication that may not be salient in other disciplines is apprehension. A wealth of research in communication addresses various aspects of communication apprehension, particularly in public speaking contexts. In parallel, composition scholars have noted the role that writing apprehension can play on writing-related outcomes.

Communication apprehension has traditionally been defined as fear or anxiety about communication events, either real or anticipated (McCroskey, 1970). While such apprehension is often equated with a fear of public speaking, the construct can be used to address multiple communicative contexts, including interpersonal and groups. In college classrooms, 20% of students believe they are highly apprehensive about communication (McCroskey & Richmond, 2006).

While a variety of approaches can help students with communication apprehension, among the most common is the development of skills, such as through a basic communication course. Research demonstrates the ability of instruction to reduce apprehension as students' skill set expands (e.g., Dwyer, 2000). Because most speakers experience some level of public speaking anxiety depending on the event (Hunter, Westwick, & Haleta, 2014), these instructional interventions can be particularly useful. When courses such as the basic communication course require students to engage in public speaking, apprehensive students stand to lose--or gain--much from the experience. This reality is especially true in online environments where the communication receiver and sender may be strangers (Vevea, Pearson, Child, & Semlak, 2009) because uncertainty about an audience can increase apprehension.

Public speaking, an area of high anxiety in students with communication apprehension (Hunter et al., 2014), is a prominent feature of many basic course offerings (Morreale et al., 2016). Dwyer and Fus (2002), posed that the completion of a public speaking course should influence a student's perceived competency level and appreciation of the subject-matter. Specifically, perceptions of competence will increase and levels of apprehension will decrease (Dwyer & Fus, 2002). As such, assessment of public speaking outcomes should become a central focus of a new blended basic course modality.

Less publicly, students can also experience writing apprehension (Mascle, 2013). Students with poor writing skills are more likely to find writing an anxiety-ridden process and less likely to have the skills to handle these challenges (Mascle, 2013).

Writing apprehension can include a writer's tendency to avoid situations where one may have to write or one's tendency to find writing unrewarding (Mabrito, 2000). Additionally, Mabrito (2000) says that writing apprehension can also manifest itself in an unwillingness to have writing evaluated or displayed publicly. As is true of oral communication apprehension, students' writing apprehension affects academic and career choices (e.g., Faris, Golen, & Lynch, 1999). Students high in writing apprehension also tend to write less and of lower quality than students who have less apprehension (e.g., Faris et al., 1999; Matoti & Shumba, 2011).

Students' apprehensions are well-established as influential on outcomes. An individual's stress and anxiety can also be related to beliefs about actual abilities (Pajares & Kranzler, 1995). Thus, we examine self-efficacy as a second, related construct in order to more fully explore students' experiences in our courses.

Self-efficacy

With its roots in social learning theory, self-efficacy refers to the belief that an individual has in his or her ability to achieve a particular task at a desired level of performance (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy can be developed through multiple means, including actual experiences, observing success in other people perceived as similar, being verbally persuaded by others that they possess such abilities, and general emotional states. Increased self-efficacy comes from activities such as taking courses in the related subject area (Dwyer & Fus, 2002) or engaging in web-based interventions (e.g., Poddar, Hosig, Anderson, Nickols-Richardson, & Duncan, 2010).

Although self-efficacy is not inherently about learning, there are numerous positive educational outcomes when people have greater self-efficacy. People with higher self-efficacy tend to have better job performance (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), more effective study habits, and greater academic achievement (Thomas, Iventosch, & Rohwer, 1987). These findings extend to the current focus as well; for example, writing self-efficacy and writing performance are correlated (e.g., Pajares & Johnson, 1994; Ranelli & Nelson, 1998) and self-efficacy can also predict writing performance (McCarthy et al., 1985; Sanders-Reio, Alexander, Reio, & Newman, 2014). Self-efficacy research has shown that self-efficacy may positively influence student achievement (Dwyer & Fuss, 1999, 2002; Klassen, 2002; Warren, 2011). As such, we hope to provide a basis for future self-efficacy research in blended basic course modalities.

For our study, the basic course serves as an ideal environment to compare the levels of apprehension and self-efficacy of students in blended and face-to-face modalities. As the blended modality becomes a more popular option for basic course sessions, it is important to compare course structures and identity measures to assess course outcomes. It is crucial that scholars understand the differences created when course modalities are modified, especially the impact on individual student learners. Therefore, our first research question derives from literature that suggests that students with particular characteristics may self-select into particular formats (McCroskey & Andersen, 1976) while other scholars note no such difference in student characteristics (Clark & Jones, 2001).

> RQ1: Do students who select a blended version of a course differ significantly from students who select the face-to-face version on measures of apprehension and self-efficacy based on pre-test and post-test comparative analysis?

The first hypothesis deals with students' changes over the course of the semester, drawing on the idea that students should see changes in a semester. Specifically, students should experience less apprehension and greater self-efficacy.

> H1: Students' post-test scores in both face-to-face and blended modalities will be significantly different from their pre-test scores such that:
>
> > H1a: Apprehension scores for public speaking and writing will each be significantly lower at the end of the semester compared to the start of the semester.
> >
> > H1b: Self-efficacy scores for public speaking, language use, writing, and visual communication will each be significantly higher at the end of the semester compared to the start of the semester.

Finally, we pose a research question that addresses potential differences in changes between students in the hybrid and students in the face-to-face versions:

RQ2: How does the change in students' responses differ between the hybrid and face-to-face sections for measures of apprehension and self-efficacy?

Exploring answers to these research questions and hypotheses not only enhances scholars' understandings of the impact of modified course structures, but also provides vital information for our assessment of course learning outcomes.

Methods

This study draws on students in four sections of the second course in a two-semester basic communication course sequence. This curriculum combines writing and speaking along with elements of interpersonal, group, and intercultural communication. Example assignments representative of this sequence are available elsewhere (Housley Gaffney & Frisby, 2013). Students typically complete this course sequence during their first year at the university, although students who complete the first course in the spring of their first year will take the second course as sophomores.

This study draws on portions of a larger project that includes capturing pre-test and post-test measures of students enrolled in the basic communication and composition course at a large Midwestern university. In the particular semester under study, two instructors each taught one section of the course as a hybrid. Those same instructors also each taught one section of the course in a traditional face-to-face format; these traditional sections were selected as the comparison.

Participants

Pre-test and post-test data is collected at this Southern university as part of institutional assessment efforts. In the final two weeks of the semester, all students in these courses complete an online assignment. As part of that assignment, students are presented with an informed consent document for an ongoing research study. Students who consent to participate in the study are told that after the semester is complete and final grades are entered, the researchers will request copies of their work from selected assignments. Consenting provides no particular incentive for students and a decision not to consent will not affect students' grades or standing. After the semester was complete, the principle investigator for the project collected the students' responses to their pre-test and post-test assignments for this particular study.

Within the four pilot sections, 43 students consented to be included. Students ranged from 18 to 26, with a mean age of 19.88. Participants included 20 men

(46.5%) and 23 women (53.5%). Seven (16.3%) participants reported their current class rank as freshman. The majority of students were sophomores (55.8%), with some juniors (16.3%), and two seniors (4.7%). Two students (4.7%) indicated that they are transfer students so they are not certain of their rank or status while one student (2.3%) reported that he/she was a sophomore by credit but is new to college. Because the blended basic course design was approached as a pilot, the sample size was limited.

Measures and analysis

As part of the basic course design at this large Southeastern university, assessment of the basic course is conducted every semester. As part of that project, students complete a pre-test within the first weeks of the semester and a parallel post-test in the final two weeks of the semester. Both tests include the same measure, although the presentation of measures and of individual items within a measure are randomized. Students complete the assignments through a survey in Qualtrics, an online survey management system. Students earn five points for completing each of the assignments (approximately 1% of their final course grade for each). All scales have been used repeatedly as part of a department-wide pre-test and post-test assessment procedure.

Writing apprehension. To measure writing apprehension, the 20 item writing apprehension scale was used (Daly & Miller, 1975). Sample statements included items such as I avoid writing and I enjoy writing, with several items reverse coded for analysis. Students responded on a scale of 1-5 (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree) indicating how strongly they agree with each statement. The scale was reliable at both pre-test (α = .93, M = 2.74, SD = .74) and post-test (α = .94, M = 2.75, SD = .78).

Communication apprehension. The battery of measures for the course includes McCroskey's (1982) Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) which measures apprehension in multiple contexts. For this paper, we specifically selected the public speaking subscale, which included items such as "While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts that I really know." The scale was reliable at both pre-test (α = .86, M = 3.10, SD = .75) and post-test (α = .83, M = 2.85, SD = .81). A high score on the PRCA-24 indicates one is more apprehensive while a lower score signifies less communication apprehension.

Self-efficacy. Because the concept of self-efficacy is grounded within specific activities rather than generalized, our self-efficacy items represent the specific skills taught in our courses. In all cases, students were presented with specific activities or actions and asked to move a slider between 0 and 100, with 100 meaning students are very certain they can perform the task, and a lower number indicating less certainty about the ability to do a certain task. These measures are specific to our context, so we began with an exploratory factor analysis to be certain that each measure of self-efficacy was unidimensional as intended. In all cases, the unidimensional nature was confirmed. Thus, for each component of self-efficacy, a student's score was based on the mean of responses to all items on that scale.

The public speaking self-efficacy questionnaire was based on Warren's (2011) measure and includes 19 items such as "I can grab the audience's attention at the beginning of my speech." The measure was reliable at both pre-test (α =.98, M = 75.05, SD = 16.10) and post-test (α = .98, M = 79.01, SD = 17.44) at the post-test.

The questionnaire measuring language self-efficacy (e.g., I can utilize concrete, precise language), which had four items, received an alpha reliability of .88 (M = 78.65, SD = 14.06) at the pre-test and .98 (M = 80.28, SD = 19.76) at the post-test.

A nine item questionnaire measuring writing self-efficacy (e.g., I can organize my ideas effectively in writing) had a Cronbach's alpha of .97 (M = 74.85, SD = 18.22) at the pre-test and an alpha reliability of .98 (M = 76.13, SD = 17.68) at the post-test.

Finally, the visual communication self-efficacy questionnaire, which contained five items (e.g., I can select visual elements that enhance my message), achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .96 (M = 75.47, SD = 17.20) at the pre-test and .97 (M = 79.52, SD = 17.07) at the post-test.

Analysis. Students' responses on each measure were paired so that each student had a complete pre-test and post-test. We also computed a change score for each measure for each student (change = post – pre). In order to test initial differences, independent samples *t*-tests were computed; paired samples *t*-tests were utilized to compare students' pre-test and post-test responses. Differences between the two course structures comparing the beginning and end of the semester were gauged using independent samples *t*-tests on change scores.

Results

The first research question sought to determine if the students in the two course structures were significantly different on the initial measures, specifically apprehension and self-efficacy based on pre-test and post-test comparative analysis.

No measures were significantly different between the two structures; Table 1 presents an overview of means and standard deviations, while Table 2 presents comparison results.

Table 1
Pre-test and post-test means and standard deviations for all measures, divided by course structure

	Hybrid		**Face-to-face**	
	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)
Speaking Apprehension	2.98 (0.72)[a]	2.67 (0.70) [a]	3.18 (0.78)	2.99 (0.87)
Writing Apprehension	2.61 (0.72)	2.63 (0.75)	2.83 (0.75)	2.83 (0.80)
Speaking Self-Efficacy	76.97 (16.71)[b]	81.29 (13.30)[b]	73.66 (15.85)	77.37 (20.00)
Writing Self-Efficacy	74.06 (20.85)	77.44 (15.58)	75.42 (16.50)	75.19 (19.30)
Language Self-Efficacy	79.49 (16.94)	80.64 (15.50)	78.05 (11.90)	80.03 (22.65)
Visual Self-Efficacy	75.30 (19.32)[c]	79.90 (13.98)[c]	75.60 (15.92)	79.24 (19.27)

Superscript letters indicate a statistically significant difference between the paired letters at the $p<.05$ level.

Table 2.
T-test pre- and post-test comparisons between course structures (hybrid - face-to-face)

	Pre-test	Post-test	Change Scores
Speaking Apprehension	-0.85	-1.28	-0.73
Writing Apprehension	-0.94	-0.86	0.13
Speaking Self-efficacy	0.66	0.72	0.16[1]
Writing Self-Efficacy	-0.24	0.41	0.68
Language Self-Efficacy	0.33	0.10	-0.16
Visual Self-Efficacy	-0.06	0.12	.17[2]

[1] *df = 34.38,* [2]*df = 31.96*

Note. Unless otherwise indicated, df = 41. Degrees of freedom differed when equal variances could not be assumed according to Levene's test for equality of variance.

The first hypothesis was split into two parts, both dealing with changes from the pre-test to the post-test. The authors hypothesized that student post-test scores in both modalities would be significantly different from the pre-test scores. To aid in the further examination of what happened in each course format, we looked at the course as a whole, and then checked these hypothesized relationships within each course structure. H1a focused on apprehension, which the authors hypothesized should decrease from pre-test to post-test. Students reported a significant decrease in public speaking apprehension across both types of course structure, $t(42) = 3.01$, $p < .01$ with pre-test apprehension ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.75$) higher than at post-test ($M = 2.85$, $SD = .81$). Writing apprehension was not significantly different at the post-test, $t(42) = -.35$, $p = .73$. Thus, H1a was partially supported with the full data set.

Within blended sections, public speaking apprehension was significantly lower at the post-test compared to the pre-test, $t(17) = 2.37$, $p < .05$. Writing apprehension was not significantly different, $t(17) = -0.33$, $p = .75$. Within face-to-face sections, there were no significant differences between pre-test and post-test scores for either public speaking apprehension, $t(24) = 1.88$, $p = .07$, or writing apprehension, $t(24) = -0.18$, $p = .86$.

H1b dealt with self-efficacy scores, which the authors originally hypothesized should increase in both course structures over the semester. Speaking efficacy increased, though not significantly, $t(42) = -1.94$, $p = .06$. Likewise, efficacy for writing did not increase significantly, $t(42) = -0.49$, $p = .63$. Efficacy for language, $t(42) = -0.64$, $p = .53$, and efficacy for visuals, $t(42) = -1.32$, $p = .20$ were not significantly different at post-test than at pre-test. Thus, H1b was not supported using all data.

Within hybrid sections, students reported higher self-efficacy for public speaking at the end of the semester compared to the start of the semester, $t(17) = -2.60$, $p < .05$. Students also reported significantly higher self-efficacy for visual communication at the end of the semester, $t(17) = -2.13$, $p < .05$. The remaining two self-efficacy measures were not significantly different at the end of the semester: writing, $t(17) = -1.11$, $p = .28$; language, $t(17) = -0.45$, $p = .66$. Thus, H1b received minimal support within the blended sections.

Within face-to-face sections, there were no significant differences between pre-test and post-test for efficacy related to public speaking, $t(24) = -1.11$, $p = .28$, writing, $t(24) = 0.06$, $p = .95$, language, $t(24) = -0.49$, $p = .63$, or visuals, $t(24) = -0.72$, $p = .48$. Thus, H1b received no support in the face-to-face sections.

Finally, the second research question probed potential differences in changes between students in the hybrid and students in the face-to-face sections. There were no significant differences between the change scores in the face-to-face and the blended sections (see Table 2).

Discussion and implications

Results from this study of communication apprehension and self-efficacy in the basic course give rise to several important considerations and practical implications. This discussion focuses on these findings in terms of blended course design and pedagogy unique to the new blended modality.

First and foremost, this study further reinforces that there are no significant differences of communication apprehension and self-efficacy levels when comparing face-to-face and blended basic course students at the pre-test and post-test levels. This is additional ground for the blended modality as a legitimate course format in the basic course (Morreale et al., 2016). However, there were some troubling considerations. Neither group, face-to-face or blended, showed a decrease in writing apprehension. Despite the assumption that online participation may encourage more opportunities to decrease writing apprehension, it may be true that low-apprehensive

and high-apprehensive student writers remained relatively static in their self-perceptions of their writing capabilities. As such, a next step for online/blended (and face-to-face) basic courses may be a rejuvenation of writing affect through activities that encourage students to participate in, and grow in affect toward, academic writing.

The blended sections of the basic course did show a significant decrease in public speaking apprehension from the pre-test to the post-test; however, face-to-face students did not significantly decrease over the semester. Unwillingness to communicate is reduced when the perceived rewards of the communication act outweigh the risk associated with the communication event of communicating (Vevea et al., 2009). It could be that face-to-face students considered the traditional classroom more threatening and an environment where communicating to, and in front of, their peers did not outweigh the rewards of their participation. While the online environment may present "strangers," thus creating a risky environment for sharing (Vevea et al., 2009), students in the basic course may be more attuned to the online or blended environment and less fearful of the "stranger" profile, especially as digital natives continue to transition to higher education (Ballano, Uribe, & Munté-Ramos, 2014). In addition, it could be that the online or blended environment provides a safe space for sharing despite the lack of traditional consistent face-to-face contact.

The self-efficacy findings are also encouraging (in that the blended and face-to-face groups experienced no significant differences) yet troubling. Face-to-face students did not display a significant difference in self-efficacy (public speaking, writing, language or visual) from the pre-test to the post-test. In a vacuum this could be a result of course design, the particular student population, or a variety of other factors. However, what is interesting is that the blended students did experience a significant self-efficacy increase in two realms: public speaking (again potentially reinforcing the thoughts related to communication apprehension presented above) as well as visual communication (potentially as a result of the digital course environment). One suggestion for future face-to-face courses is to potentially include online interaction where students can engage in mediated public speaking opportunities. Instructors may also be well served to integrate online interactive activities that present students in face-to-face courses with an opportunity to engage with online visuals. The multimodal capabilities of a blended or online basic course could be used in a traditional face-to-face section-even if not a major emphasis.

As previously stated, this study does reinforce the potential equitable learning outcome achievement in face-to-face or blended course offerings. Originally, the institution where research was conducted had a vision for moving a majority of basic course sections into a blended format. While that may still be a future endeavor, this study clarified a unified vision for transitioning the basic course. The authors believe it is important to move courses into a blended modality; however, the transition must be strategic and calculated. The basic course may be a pedagogical training ground and a ripe environment for unique modality but the basic course should be offered as a means to enhance current curriculum.

Practically speaking, there are strengths and drawbacks to each modality. While the formats may be equitable, instructors should view each structure (face-to-face and blended) as an opportunity. This study did compare modalities however, it is important to look at what happens within each structure rather than just straight comparisons. As such, while comparisons are helpful for determining the equitability of learning outcomes, a unique approach to each course, recognizing that there may not be a "one size fits all" component, would be helpful for instructors and administrators to understand.

Limitations and future research

As with any scholarly investigation, this study did have several limitations. The findings of this study were limited by a small sample size. While a larger sample size would have been ideal, current course offerings limited the study population. Additionally, this study was only conducted at one institution and thus has limited generalizability. Finally, this study used measures to understand student perceptions of their own self-efficacy and apprehension but the researchers did not use direct learning measures. However, future research could help solve these concerns by addressing a larger sample size and exploring blended course initiatives at other institutions.

In terms of additional future directions, assessment of basic course modality should move beyond a direct comparison that positions one format as superior or both formats as equitable. While this study was important for establishing a baseline of data related to differences in self-efficacy and apprehension of students in a face-to-face and blended version of the basic course, it is important to look at instruction and student learning within each modality. As such, students potentially should not be constrained to one method and, in order to meet a variety of needs, online and

traditional courses should blend the best of both modalities (Stein & Graham, 2014). Therefore, future research should further explore, in greater depth, student learning and concentrate on direct learning measures to establish the equitable nature of blended and face-to-face courses. For example, the perspective of the 21st-century student on the digital space may add an interesting (and necessary) trajectory. Scholars would be wise to begin to determine how students perceive the online space in light of their digital upbringing. Are students more, or less, inclined to view others as strangers in an online environment, especially when compared to previous generations. These are important next steps for communication (and basic course) scholars as we attempt to reach the next generation of communication practitioners.

Conclusion

This study presents an opportunity for a renewed emphasis in instructional strategies and unique modalities used in the basic course. Activities and assignments that decrease anxiety and apprehension, and increase a feeling of community, are appropriate for the blended environment (as well as face-to-face) and can help students feel connected to their peers and the instructor. The immediate value-added for this manuscript is further consideration that blended and face-to-face courses can be equitable. However, as a result of this piece, we hope that instructors see the validity of the blended basic course as a supplement to academic programs. Additionally, it may behoove instructors to include activities that can be utilized in an online or blended modality as supplemental activities for face-to-face students.

Author information

Michael G. Strawser, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky.

Amy L. Housley Gaffney, Ph.D., is Director of the Oral Communication Center at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY.

Allyson DeVito, Ph.D., is a Faculty Lecturer in the College of Communication and Information at the University of Kentucky

Sarah E. Kercsmar, Ph.D., is a Faculty Lecturer in the College of Communication and Information at the University of Kentucky.

Michael Pennell, Ph.D., Michael Pennell is an Associate Professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies at the University of Kentucky.

References

Allen, T. H. (2006). Is the rush to provide online instruction setting our students up for failure? *Communication Education*, *55*, 122-126. doi: 10.1080/03634520500343418

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2014). Grade change: Tracking online education in the United States. Retrieved from http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com

Ballano, S., Uribe, A. C., & Munté-Ramos, R. (2014). Young users and the digital divide: Readers, participants or creators on Internet? *Communication & Society*, 147-155. doi:10.15581/003.27.4.147-155

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Backlund, P., & Wakefield, G. (Eds.). (2010). *A communication assessment primer*. Washington, DC: National Communication Association.

Clark, R. A., & Jones, D. (2001). A comparison of traditional and online formats in a public speaking course. *Communication Education*, *50*, 109-124.

Donnelly, K., Rizvi, S., & Summers, L. (2013). An avalanche is coming: Higher education and the revolution ahead. Retrieved from http://www.ippr.org.

Dwyer, K. K. (2000). The multidimensional model: Teaching students to self-manage high communication apprehension by self-selecting treatments. *Communication Education*, *49*, 72-81.

Dwyer, K. K., & Fuss, D. A. (1999). Communication apprehension, self-efficacy, and trait communication apprehension: Is there an impact on basic course success? *Basic Communication Course Annual*, *11*, 108-132.

Dwyer, K. K., & Fus, D. A. (2002). Perceptions of communication competence, self-Efficacy, and trait communication apprehension: Is there an impact on basic course success? *Communication Research Reports*, *19*, 29-37.

Garrison, R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *Internet and Higher Education*, *7*, 95-105.

Goodnight, L., & Wallace, S. (Eds.). (2005). *The basic course online: Scholarship and application*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing.

Housley Gaffney, A. L., & Frisby, B. N. (2013). *A new hybrid: Students' extensions of integrated communication content. Basic Communication Course Annual*, *25*, 207-244.

Hugenberg, B., & Hugenberg, L. W. (2007). *The basic communication course online: Challenges and practical suggestions for success.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the NCA 93rd annual convention, Chicago, IL.

Hunter, K. M., Westwick, J. N., & Haleta, L. L. (2014). Assessing success: The impacts of a fundamentals of speech course on decreasing public speaking anxiety. *Communication Education*, *63*, 124-135. doi:10.1080/03634523.2013.875213

International Education Advisory Board. (2009). *IEAB white paper on learning in the 21st century*. Retrieved from https://www.certiport.com

Jones, V. R. (2012). 21st-century learners. *Techniques,* 17-19.

Kim, J. (2011). Developing an instrument to measure social presence in distance higher education. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *42*, 763-777.

Kirkwood, J., Gutgold, N. D., & Manley, D. (2011). Hello world, it's me: Bringing the basic speech communication course into the digital age. *Communication Teacher, 25, 150-153.*

Klassen, R. (2002). Writing in early adolescence: A review of the role of self-efficacy beliefs. *Educational Psychology Review*, *14*, 173-203.

Mabrito, M. (2000). Computer conversations and writing apprehension. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *63*, 39-49.

Mascle, D. D. (2013). Writing self-efficacy and written communication skills. *Business Communication Quarterly*, *76*, 216-225. doi:10.1177/1080569913480234

McCroskey, J. C. (1970). Measures of communication-bound anxiety. *Speech Monographs*, *37,* 269-277.

McCroskey, J. C., & McCroskey, L. L. (2006). Instructional communication: The Historical Perspective. In T. P. Mottet, V. P. Richmond, & J. C. McCroskey, *Handbook of Instructional Communication: Rhetorical & Relational Perspectives.* Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

McCroskey, J. C., & Richmond, V. P. (2006). Understanding the audience: Students' communication traits. In T. P. Mottet, V. P. Richmond, and J. C. McCroskey (Eds.), *Handbook of instructional communication: Rhetorical and relational perspectives* (51-66). Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

McGee, P. & Reis, A. (2012). Blended course design: A synthesis of best practices. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, *16*, 7-22.

McLester, S. (2011). Building a blended learning program. *District Administration*, *47*, 40-53.

Moore, M. G. (2007). Learners come in different types. *American Journal of Distance Education*, *21*, 1-2. DOI: 10.1080/08923640701298571.

Morreale, S. P., Hugenberg, L., & Worley, D. (2006). The basic communication course at U.S. colleges and universities in the 21st century: Study VII. *Communication Education*, *55*, 415-437.

Morreale, S. P., Myers, S. A., Backlund, P. M., & Simonds, C. J. (2016). Study IX of the basic communication course at two-and four-year U.S. colleges and universities: A re-examination of our discipline's front porch. *Communication Education*, *65*, 338-355. doi:10.1080/03634523.2015.1073339

Morreale, S. P., Worley, D. W., & Hugenberg, B. (2010). The basic communication course at two-and four-year U.S. colleges and universities: Study VII-The 40th Anniversary. *Communication Education, 59*, 405-430.

National Communication Association. (2014). Programs of excellence: Basic Course course descriptions. Retrieved from http://www.natcom.org.

Stein, J., & Graham, C. R. (2014). *Essentials for blended learning: A standards-based guide.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Reed, D., & Sork, T. J. (2009). Ethical considerations in distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, *4*, 30-43.

Rydeen, J. (2011). Blended learning. *American School and University*, *83*, 38.

Valenzano III, J. M., Wallace, S. P., & Morreale, S. P. (2014). Consistency and change: The (R)evolution of the basic communication course. *Communication Education*, *63,* 355-365. doi: 10.1080/03634523.2014.911928.

Vaughan, N., & Garrison, D. R. Creating cognitive presence in a blended faculty development community. *Internet and Higher Education*, *8*, 1-12.

Vevea, N. N., Pearson, J. C., Child, J. T., & Semlak, J. L. (2009). The only thing to fear is ... public speaking? Exploring predictors of communication in the public speaking classroom. *Journal of the Communication, Speech & Theatre Association of North Dakota*, *22*, 1-8.

Wahlstrom, C., Williams, B. K., & Shea, P. (2003). *The successful distance learning student*. Belmont, CA: Scratchgravel.

Warren, J. L. (2011). *The relationship between service learning and public speaking self-efficacy: Toward engaging today's undergraduates.* Retrieved from http://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=comm_etds