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Examining Students' Learning and Preparation in a Basic Communication Course

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Research Article

Examining Students' Learning and Preparation in a Basic Communication Course

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Abstract

Prior to beginning a basic communication course, students enter with learning expectations and motivations to transfer knowledge outside the classroom. The present study examined 373 qualitative pre- and post-test responses from students enrolled in a basic communication course to assess their self-defined learning and speaking preparation expectations. Through our findings, we learn that students articulate their goals in relationship to communication skills (e.g., reduce anxiety, verbal/non-verbal, audience analysis, personal goals, and confidence) and preparation (e.g., writing, outlining, presenting, and past experiences). These findings are explored in greater detail and extend our understanding of students' goals and expectations when they enter the basic communication course. Implications, limitations, and future directions are also presented.

Keywords: communication skills, preparation, learning goals, public speaking, qualitative pre-post-test, basic communication course

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Introduction

Each semester students begin their courses with expectations about who their instructor will be, the instructor's communication in and outside of the classroom, the quantity of homework, and the classroom management strategies implemented by the instructor. In a basic communication course, students may enter with positive or negative previous public speaking experiences and have both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations—all inform students' ideas about the course and what they hope to learn. For some students, a basic communication course may be closely related to their professional goals and therefore, shape their interest in the course. Other students may take the course because they are required to do so or because their friends are enrolled too. Taken together, all of these factors contribute to students' interest, motivation, and expectations for the course.

Once the course begins, students' expectations may stay the same or change with the classroom culture, students enrolled, and as a result of the instructor behaviors. The classroom is an interactional space shaped by the verbal and non-verbal communication of both students and instructors. Instructional communication scholars have shown the importance and positive outcomes effective instructional communication behaviors have on student learning (e.g., immediacy, clarity, and classroom management among others). However, research has largely failed to consider what students' expectations are for their learning in the classroom and how, if at all, these expectations are met through the duration of the course (for exceptions see Frymier & Weser, 2001; Gigliotti, 1987; Marsh & Roche, 2000). While instructors are well informed about the positive and negative effects of instructional communication behaviors, better understanding students' expectations could inform a variety of constructs related to student learning and success.

This study presents an examination of students' self-described learning expectations for a basic communication course and how, if at all, these expectations are met through the course. Through the review of literature, we present an understanding for the constructs of students' course expectations, motivation, as well as highlight the importance of considering communication apprehension as it relates to a basic communication course.

Expectations

The classroom is often conceptualized as a space influenced by the behaviors of an instructor, but this view fails to recognize the contributions and expectations of

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students. According to Gigliotti (1987), expectations are "a prediction about what will happen in some situation; it is a probability judgment based on previous learning" (p. 365). Students begin every course they take with certain expectations including how much work will be required (Kember, 2004; Mottet, Parker-Raley, Cunningham, & Beebe, 2005), how instructors will interact with them (Frymier & Weser, 2001), expectations about grading (Remedios & Lieberman, 2008), prior academic performance (Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998), or self-perception of their own academic abilities (Zimmerman, 1989).

Borrowing from researchers in the field of economics, we glean that expectations are typically judgments about what an individual or group thinks either will happen or should happen under particular circumstances (Manski, 2004). That is, expectations are related to previous experiences, influenced by personal characteristics, or affected by information. Manski (2004) argues that Americans hold high expectations for investments and value information differently; however, their value judgments tend be stable and long lasting. Similar to investments, the classroom and education tend to evoke arguably high expectations and strong judgments that may influence and explain students' learning gains and failures.

Buckley, Veres, Fedor, Wiese, and Carraher (1998), in studying employee satisfaction, found that lowering perspective employees' expectations through presenting realistic scenarios and information resulted in reduced turnover and increased satisfaction. Extending these findings to the classroom, it is possible students' dissatisfaction with their learning may be a result of unrealistic expectations. Schwarz and Zhu (2015) found that if instructors facilitated the development of realistic student expectations at the beginning of a course then students had a higher satisfaction at the end of the course. Self-efficacy could lead to certain expectations for a course outcome as well. Wigfield and Eccles (2000), in their Expectancy-Value Theory, suggest that if students expect to do well in a course, believe they will succeed (i.e., self-efficacy), and view the task to be worthwhile, then they will be highly motivated as well.

Related to expectations, a large body of literature focuses on the effects of student motivation – both extrinsic and intrinsic – on student learning (see Brophy, 1987; Christophel, 1990; Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007). Research has also focused on a variety of motivational aspects, including how students beliefs, values, and goals relate to classroom performance (Wigfield, 1997), motivational differences in traditional versus nontraditional students (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007), the impact of interest in pleasing peers, instructors, and parents (Ormrod, 2008),

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students' affective reactions related to their expertise and difficulty of the task (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008), and positive outcome expectations (Bandura, 1993), to name just a few. However, while expectations and motivations may be related, they might also be different. Students' motivations for taking a particular course may be entirely different from the expectations they have for what will happen in the course and how well they will do. This might be especially true in public speaking courses precisely because students not only have to learn about public speaking but they have to perform publicly too.

Public Speaking Apprehension

Most research on public speaking focuses on students' apprehension about giving speeches after they are enrolled in a class. A number of studies have looked at anxiety as a trait – some individuals feel more anxious about public speaking than others - and the ways it is related to apprehension and ability to speak in public. The majority of these studies focus on identifying public speaking anxiety in order to develop interventions (for a meta-analysis of the wide variety of mainly self-report measures, see Allen, Hunter and Donohue, 1989). These types of tests also include identifying fears (Hsu, 2004) and phobias (Osorio, Crippa, & Loureiro, 2013). Students may have cognitive (e.g., distracting thoughts) and affective (e.g., fear) anticipations of and responses to public speaking, which may lead to them feeling like they are going to fail in delivering a speech or even the course itself.

Negative experiences with public speaking anxiety in the past may affect people's normal ability to manage their experiences and may even overwhelm their ability to process experiences in non-threatening ways (Shi, Brinthaupt, & McCree, 2015). Luccetti, Phipps, and Behnke (2003) suggest individuals who think they will do well on individual speeches typically experience less anxiety and increased feelings of self-worth. Such feelings in approaching a course could impact how a student feels about an overall course beyond individual speeches. McCroskey and Beatty (1986) argue that a student with high communication apprehension might withdraw from a course unless they have the extrinsic motivation to achieve a good grade.

Besides apprehension and anxiety, others focus on identifying the speaker's view of themselves as an indicator of ability to speak in public. Self-talk before or during a speech has been examined and findings indicate students should be trained to regulate their self-talk in order to manage anxiety and enhance speech performance (Osorio et al., 2013; Shi et al., 2015). Larseingue, Sawyer, and Finn (2012) found that

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approximately one-fifth of the variance in course grade expectations among public speakers results from a trait-like or overall response to being evaluated and how well they think they prepared and performed speeches.

Students may be motivated to take a public speaking class for a variety of intrinsic or extrinsic reasons. They also may have general expectations for a course and, particularly relevant to public speaking courses, may have apprehension about how they will perform in the class. However, there is little research examining specific expectations of students at the beginning of a course and whether those expectations are met by the end of the course. Based on the above research, we offer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students describe their learning expectations in the pre-test and learning outcomes in the post-test?

RQ2: How do students describe their public speaking presentation expectations across the pre and post-tests?

Method

Qualitative methods of analysis were employed to answer our research questions. This methodology is committed to the "importance of interpretation and understanding" as well presenting participants' lived experiences (Denzin, 2010, p. 27). As interpretative qualitative researchers, we believe it is important to acknowledge our respective positionalities because they inform our meaning-making processes (Ellingson, 2009). Together, we reflexively present our identities as White, cis-gendered females who teach at a large Western public university; with the first author identifying as non-religious and the second author identifying with Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). We believe our embodied experiences intersect and inform our research and analysis of our participants' words.

Site and Participants

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, data was collected for a large multi-section, basic communication course at a Western public university. The survey assessment was designed as a pre- and post-test experience (first and last two weeks of the term). Students were asked to respond to demographic questions (i.e., race, gender, age, year in school, as well as open-ended response spaces for students

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to self-identify within and among categories). For the purposes of this project, the following pre-test questions were analyzed: "What do you hope to learn in the course?" and "How do you plan on preparing for your presentations?" The following post-test questions were examined: "What did you learn in the course?" and "How will you prepare for future presentations after this course?"

Students were awarded 10 points (1% of their overall grade) for completing the survey. The sample consisted of 792 undergraduate students, including 513 men and 279 women, and ranged in age from 18-57 ($M = 21.7$). The majority of students (373) were first-years, while the sample also included 261 sophomores, 81 juniors, 60 seniors, and 17 who did not indicate year in school. Furthermore, 574 participants identified as white, 64 as Hispanic, 20 as Asian, 13 as black, three as Native American, four as Pacific Islander, and 114 students chose to not identify race/ethnicity. To provide anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. After organizing the data set, 373 matching pre and post-test responses remained for analysis.

Data Procedures and Analysis

Upon the completion of the data organization procedures, the researchers independently read and re-read approximately 200-250 participant pre- and post-test responses for each of the open-ended survey questions. During this process, each author took notes of interesting comments and reactions to participant responses. Following this, we met and began analyzing our separate notes and observations in order to begin identifying first-level open codes that were "provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 48). Through the constant comparative method, we reflexively organized our data in a systematic process which allowed for generative categories to emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). During this iterative coding process, we organized our participants' responses and examined over 25 first-level codes (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Over the course of two months the researchers discussed the first-level codes of: "prepare my speeches," "better communicator," "overcome fears, "organize speeches, "cope with anxiety," "gain confidence, "learning the style of speeches," "properly address my audience," and "practicing."

Following the initial coding processes, the researchers began organizing the first-level codes into categories until theoretical saturation was reached or the "category emerged over and over again" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61). As we explored the

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emergent first-level categories, we took note of interesting comments such as "talking in front of the whole class," "how to outline," "be able to better organize my thoughts for future jobs and church callings," "understand what an audience wants to hear," "I'll wing it," and "use feedback from my family members to make my speech great." A significant portion of our analysis was dedicated to discussing and re-reading our participants' statements in order to develop rich codes.

Next, we compiled the most frequent first-level codes into a list in order to organize our research categories (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Following this step, we then inductively organized the data into overarching themes of *Communication Skills* to answer RQ1 and *Preparation* to address RQ2. These themes extended our second-level codes by grouping abstract participant comments like "Giving speeches and convincing people to see some level what I am thinking," "I'm afraid of not being prepared enough. By nature, I'm a perfectionist," "To calm my anxiety and stop being nervous when I am giving speeches," "I want to grow from my apprehension struggles and feel okay speaking in front of groups," and "I want to learn better ways to prepare for speeches and successfully execute them." For the theme of *Communication Skills,* the following categories emerged: reduce anxiety, verbal and non-verbal, audience analysis, future goals, and confidence. The categories of writing, outlining, practicing, and past experiences emerged for the theme of *Preparation.* Finally, upon completing the analysis, we assessed the categories across the pre- and post-test questions to determine improvement, no change, or a decrease in learning expectations or future preparation.

Upon reaching an agreement on the themes and categories, we revisited literature on student learning in public speaking courses and learning more broadly, motivation, speaking anxiety, and apprehension as well as resources on transferable skills. Taken together, the aforementioned processes and procedures ensured that our data remained under the constant comparative analytical process.

Findings

To answer RQ1, the next section presents the theme and resulting categories that emerged to describe students' learning expectations and resultant outcomes. The theme of *Communication Skills* was organized into the categories of reduce anxiety, audience analysis, personal goals, and confidence (see Table 1).

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Table 1

Theme of Communication Skills and Related Categories

Category	Definition	Pre-test Exemplar	Post-test Exemplar
Reduce Anxiety	Students' worries and concerns regarding speaking as well as developing speeches.	1. "I want to learn how to not be nervous preparing for a speech." (Marc, 23, White, male, junior)	1. "I've realized that with plenty of time before the actual presentation. Procrastination never yields great results." (Marc, 23, White, male, junior)
		2. "To learn to cope with or master my anxiety in public speaking assignment/endeavors." (Emma, 21, White, Female, senior)	2. "That you must practice public speaking if you wish to overcome the anxiety." (Emma, 21, White, Female, senior)
Verbal and Non-verbal	Reflects students' focus on developing verbal and non-verbal presentation skills.	1. "Polish off my speaking skills." (Dave, 32, White, Male, sophomore)	1. "I learned about various strategies of communicating." (Dave, 32, White, Male, sophomore)
		2. "Skills to make speakers better." (Angela, 25, White, female, junior)	2. "I learned the proper body language/posture during a speech." (Angela, 25, White, female, junior)
Audience Analysis	Represents students' desire to understand her/his presentation in front of an audience.	1. "I want to learn how to present myself and the information I am providing better when giving a presentation and/or speech." (Barbara-Ann, 44, White, female, sophomore)	1. "How to prepare for and give a variety of speeches, and how to decide which style is the best for the situation." (Barbara-Ann, 44, White, female, sophomore)
		2. "I want to learn how to make speeches more enjoyable." (Amon, 18, male, freshman)	2. "I learned I can actually do well on speeches." (Amon, 18, male, freshman)

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Personal Goals	Notes students' desires to develop speaking skills for personal reasons.	1. "I am LDS so I frequently am asked to give speeches in church. I signed up for this class because I want to be better prepared." (Kyle, 19, White, male, freshman)	1. "This class was very enjoyable for me. These last few years have been difficult for me, my confidence has been pretty low. However, this class has helped me to develop more confidence in myself." (Kyle, 19, White, male, freshman)
		2. "How to be more influential with words during a speech." (Aneesa, 21, American Indian, female, junior)	2. I learned everything about public speaking. (Aneesa, 21, American Indian, female, junior)
Confidence	Students' desire to develop self-assurance in developing and speaking.	1. "Speaking in front of my peers and wanting to impress instead of just doing my best." (Hunter, 22, White, male, sophomore)	1. "I feel more confident now than I did before this class." (Hunter, 22, White, male, sophomore)
		2. "How to present with confidence and to be a better speaker." (Dale, 25, White, male, senior)	2. "My confidence is about the same. However, I spoke many times in church before taking this class." (Dale, 25, White, male, senior)

Reduce Anxiety. The category of reduce anxiety was defined by students' comments that revealed their desire to minimize, or in some instances eliminate, their speaking anxiety or nervousness. Max, a 23-year-old, White, male, freshman stated: "I want to learn how to calm down during speeches." In his post-test response he noted: "Before I was terrified to the point of almost shutting down, my last couple speeches I still was nervous but not nearly as bad as I was when I started this class." Similarly, another student explained: "I want to learn how to connect with my audience, but I really want to learn how to control my nervousness." Later he indicated: "My nervousness is significantly lower than it was when I started this class" (Bo, 22-year-old, White, male, freshman). For both Max and Bo, their goal of

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reducing their public speaking anxiety was reduced through the course of the public speaking class.

Ana, a 19-year-old, White, female, freshman, explained: "I want to be able to speak without having so much anxiety and fear." In her post-test response, she indicated: "l am still slightly scared of public speaking but my confidence has significantly increased." While some students like Ana experienced a slight reduction in their public speaking anxiety, they both indicated an increase in their confidence, which many would consider a success in a basic communication course; however, other students like Kelsi, a 38-year-old, White, female, sophomore stated: "I want to improve at public speaking and learn how to not feel nervous during and after the speech is over." At the end of the course she indicated:

> My anxiety is about the same, maybe slightly higher because I was worried about not including all of the required speech elements. It's somewhat more because of all the expectations regarding speaking structure.

For Kelsi, her speaking anxiety did not decrease but rather increased. As revealed through our participants' comments, the goal of reducing their public speaking anxiety was for some students achieved fully, partially, or not at all.

Verbal and Non-verbal. Public speaking is a performance experience based on organization, verbal, and non-verbal speaking skills. In keeping with this, this category focused on students' desire to improve their verbal and non-verbal speaking skills. Many of our students indicated speaking goals and outcomes similar to that of Monica and Kelly. Monica, an 18-year-old, White, female, freshman stated: "I want to learn better communication skills." At the end of the course in her post-test responses she noted: "I learned that I'm not going to be a great public speaker right away because it takes time."

In contrast, Karly, a 19-year-old, American Indian, female, freshman desired to improve on a more specific set of speaking skills. She stated: "I want to be more confident in presenting my words when I'm speaking in front of a lot of people." At the end of the course Karly explained:

> I learned how to create a good speech and how to properly deliver the speech. I learned that confidence and trust in yourself is key to a good speech.

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Karly's comment illustrates how through the basic communication course she learned not only the importance of speech development and delivery, but confidence too. For other students like Jennifer, a 21-year-old, White, female, sophomore, her speaking goal entailed: "Learning how to give effective speeches; specifically, how to use different forms, such as spoken word poetry." While her goal was in part incongruent with the learning outcomes of the course, she still reflected the following learning outcome:

> I learned more about working with other students; I appreciated the constant peer feedback which we had in this class. . . I learned clarity, I suppose.

Interestingly, Jennifer seemed to learn more about following directions and working with her peers than she did about verbal or non-verbal speaking skills. Taken together, it is important to note how this category reflected a wide breadth of verbal and non-verbal speaking skills.

Audience Analysis. The category of audience analysis was illustrated by students' comments that focused on a desire to present her/his speech appropriately in front of peers or individuals outside of the classroom. Often, students detailed a desire to understand how to inspire, motivate, or relate to the audience while speaking. To illustrate, a student commented: "I hope to be able to have people feel 'moved' by my speeches." At the end of the course he remarked: "I learned more about the structure of speeches and how to pick the right topics" (Finn, 21-year-old, race unknown, sophomore). Another student, Shari, a 19-year-old, White, female, freshman stated the following goal:

> I hope to learn how to give speeches where I can let my ideas flow out and connect them together in a way everyone can understand. I don't want to sound like a robot reciting a paper when I give a speech. I hope to learn how to communicate with others better, and prepare what I have to say to others in a more convincing and constructive way.

Similar to Finn, Shari explained in her post-test response: "I learned how to correctly prepare for a speech, and how to present one more confidently." While neither student noted achieving precisely their desired goal, both demonstrated

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learning effective speech skills. Mikel, a 21-year-old, race unknown, male, freshman articulated an ambition to learn "how to engage with an audience even when it's a non-humorous speech." And aligned with Finn and Shari, Mikel demonstrated learning the following: "eye contact and energy are very important no matter the topic."

In contrast, other students, like Ian, a 21-year-old, white, male, freshman were interested in gaining knowledge on how to better understand their audience. He stated: "I would like to know how to better grasp my audience." Similarly, Alex, a 21-year-old, American Indian, male, junior noted: "I want to know how to get people to listen to my speech." Both Ian and Alex detailed similar responses in their post-test comments. More specifically, Ian explained he "learned how to give an effective speech and that it's pointless to stress over." Alex stated: "I learned how to write more structured speeches and how to [organize] my speech in a way to adhere to the three-paragraph structure." The category of audience of analysis is therefore illustrated from students' goals to "move" their audience to a more skills-based understanding through the course.

Personal Goals. Whereas the audience analysis category focused on understanding the audience, this category was defined by comments that revealed public speaking ambitions. Stated another way, these comments often focused on public speaking goals that were personal or professional. For example, Matthew, a 41-year-old, White, male, junior, noted: "I want to learn how to present myself better in an interview setting." At the end of the course he explained, "I learned public speaking organization techniques."

Unlike Matthew, Tony, a 20-year-old, White, male, freshman, articulated the following personal goal: "I want to improve my skills in communication for future church jobs and church callings." Tony noted at the end of the course: "I've learned how to improve on being stressed right before I get up and give a speech." While Matthew and Tony presented goals related to future job or church opportunities, other students like Trevor, a 22-year-old, White, male, freshman stated: "I want to learn how to diversify and improve my overall communication skills used in everyday life." Like Trevor, Alyssa, a 19-year-old, White, female, sophomore also explained: "I want to be better equip myself to present in debates in day to day life." At the end of the course, Alyssa remarked:

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> I learned that it's okay to get nervous right before the speech, and it's common for people to not really get rid of the butterflies in their stomach. But we can learn to make the butterflies fly in formation.

Although Alyssa failed to remark directly about developing day-to-day public speaking skills, she did openly express a rich understanding of natural nervousness. Taken together, this category revealed how students entered the basic communication course with personal or professional goals; however, similar to the category of *audience analysis,* they gained organizational or presentational skills.

Confidence. This category illustrated how students' desire to learn how to become more confident when delivering their speeches in and outside of class. For some students, like Jazy, an 18-year-old, White, female, freshman, the goal of learning how to build speaking confidence was fraught with uncertainty. She explained: "I hope to learn to feel more comfortable and confident about public speaking, but I'm afraid of messing up and doing poorly." Although Jazy articulated uncertainty in her pre-test comment, at the end of the course she explained: "I learned how to become the best public speaker I can be and all the skills, tips and tricks on how to accomplish this within different types of speeches." Angelina, a 26-year-old, Hispanic, female, freshman explained: "I want to be more confident when presenting to a large group of people." At the end of the course in the post-test reflected: "I learned how to present myself in front of a crowd and I also learned how to be more confident in what I am speaking about."

Finally, the theme of *Preparation* and the categories of writing, outlining, practicing, and applying past experiences answered RQ2. In Table 2, we provide the resultant categories and exemplars from both the pre and post-test questions.

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Table 2
Theme of Preparation and Related Categories

Category	Definition	Pre-test Exemplar	Post-test Exemplar
Writing		"I plan to prepare by writing everything down and reading over it a few times to make sure I really get it and then practicing giving it." (John, 18, White, male, freshman)	"I prepare best when I just let ideas come to me. If I think too hard about it my speech doesn't even sound like me anymore." (John, 18, White, male, freshman)
		"I will prepare by writing, outlining, and researching." (Rory, 19, race unknown, sophomore)	"I think I will prepare by practicing in front of people I know." (Rory, 19, race unknown, sophomore)
Outlining		"It's always been said that "Practice Makes Perfect", so with that being said, I think practicing a speech a million times before giving it, and sharing it with different groups of people each time, will help prepare for what is expected in class." (Mason, 20, White, male, freshman)	"Keeping the strategies for writing effective outlines, and practicing beforehand." (Mason, 20, White, male, freshman)
		"Research, outlines and practice." (Harper, 24, White, male, sophomore)	"Use a note card, smart phones just don't cut it." (Harper, 24, White, male, sophomore)
Practicing		"Pay attention in class and take all of the advice my professor gives me." (Emerson, 21, White, female, freshman)	"Practice several times." (Emerson, 21, White, female, freshman)
		"Practicing with my husband." (Caelan, 19, White, female, freshman)	"By rehearsing my speech to my husband a few times before giving it." (Caelan, 19, White, female, freshman)
Past Experiences		"I won't wing it, like I usually do with speeches and talks." (Adrian, 19, White, female, sophomore)	"I'll go back to winging my speeches, because that's how I feel most confident and sure." (Adrian, 19, White, female, sophomore)
		"I'm going to prepare all sorts of ways! Notes, mental/personal prep and meditation/prayer." (Austin, 22, White, male, freshman)	"Pretty much the same, but maybe outline my ideas a little more thoroughly though!" (Austin, 22, White, male, freshman)

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Writing. This category reflected students' ideas about writing ideas down in preparation for their speeches. When asked about what they hoped to learn in the class a number of students indicated they wanted to develop better skills in writing speeches (e.g., Jorge, 22-year-old, Hispanic, male, sophomore). Similarly, Sky, a 27-year-old, Hispanic, male, freshman noted "I want to be able to communicate my ideas in a clear manner that is understand." While neither Jorge nor Sky indicated an increase in writing skills when asked about what they learned at the end of the course, others did. For example, one female student said she "hoped to learn how to effectively give and write speeches" (Sara, 18-year-old, White, freshman). She noted when asked what she learned in the class that "public speaking is so important. It has taught me how to write a productive speech in just a short time" and that she will prepare for future speaking assignments by "focusing on writing more creative speeches."

Some students did not necessarily focus on hoping to learn about writing speeches but did indicate that they were concerned about any writing they might have to do. Don, a 22-year-old, White, male, sophomore said he was "anxious about writing speeches." He later noted that something he learned about preparing for future speeches was that he needed to "get an early start on my speech writing." Miguel (19-year-old, Hispanic, male, freshman) also focused on having anxiety about learning how to write speeches correctly, but in his post-survey felt that he had "learned to write a speech."

A number of other students did not indicate any need or desire to learn about how to write speeches but did note that they learned how to follow a rubric while writing a speech (e.g., Jennifer, 21-year-old, White, Female, sophomore), and that learning how to write in the class would impact how they prepared for future speeches. For example, Nate, a 24-year-old, White, male, junior said he would prepare by "studying the topic and writing a couple of drafts."

In general, more students indicated they had either learned about writing and/or saw a need to focus on writing for future speeches than those who suggested in the pre-survey that writing was a skill they hoped to acquire by taking the class.

Outlining. Outlining was also a skill that was recognized more in the post-survey than in the pre-survey. Students noted that they wanted to acquire skills in "how to prepare a speech" (e.g., John, 42-year-old, White, male, freshman) though a few did specifically mention outlining like Joan (e.g., 50-year-old, White, female, senior) when she said she "hopes to learn how to create a good outline." Another student, Grace,

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a 19-year-old, Hispanic, female, freshman stated: "I want to learn how to be able to organize my opinions and facts in an appropriate manner."

Most students, in the post-survey, mentioned outlining more frequently as a skill that they had learned in the class. Tino, a 26-year-old, Hispanic, male, freshman mentioned wanting to improve his communication skills in the pre-survey. However, in the post-survey he was much more specific in noting that he had learned the elements of outlining and organizing his speeches:

> I learned important principles when it comes to public speaking. A few of those are intros, and conclusions, transitions, the importance of making eye contact, including the audience in my speeches.

Another student, Nate, a 24-year-old, White, male, junior in the pre-survey noted they wanted to learn how to calm down when speaking but in the post-survey said they would prepare for the future by "[making] outlines and [rehearsing] them over and over." Others stated comments such as "[I learned] to follow the outline closely" (Mary, 50-year-old, White, female) or "[I learned] how to write good speech outlines" (Trevor, 22-year-old, White, male). Many students just made brief comments about what they would to do to prepare for speeches in the future such as "create an outline and use the process I learned in class" (Naomi, 20-year-old, White, female, sophomore).

One of the clearest examples in the post-survey focused on outlining principles learned from the class:

> I learned how to prepare and format my speech to maintain organization and flow. I learned how to organize my thoughts and build a speech outline. Having a formal Intro, Body, and Conclusion was helpful, as well as thinking about the purpose is for the speech and if I want to inform or persuade. (Sam, 32-year-old, White, male, junior)

Similar to writing, outlining is a skill that students may not initially recognize as needed but one that is apparent by the end of the class.

Practicing. Practicing is again, a skill that students are not particularly aware of needing at the beginning of a public speaking class. A few noted comments such as "[I] hope to learn best practices on how to practice" (Jared, 26-year-old, White, male,

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junior), but most were focused on general skills such as Rasha (25-year-old, White, female, junior) when she said "I hope to learn skills to make speeches better."

It was very apparent that practicing was a necessary skill by the end of the class. A majority of the post-survey participant responses noted practicing as being a takeaway learned in the class. Comments noted things such as "practice before doing speeches and presentations" (Mykah, 18-year-old, Asian, female, freshman) and "practice in front of your friends and family" (Andrew, 18-year-old, White, male, freshman).

Numerous students narrowed in on practicing as something that they will do as they prepare for future presentations. Blake (18-year-old, Black, female, freshman) wrote:

> I plan on preparing for my presentations by beginning to work on it once the assignment is given out so that I can make sure I have enough time to make sure I am satisfied with my work and also so that I can take the time to practice and read aloud before presenting.

Rasha (25-year-old, White, female, junior) said "make sure [to] practice more before the actual presentation due date." Still another student said, "practice presenting them in front of something as if it is the real thing" (Alyssa, 23-year-old, White, female, freshman).

Practicing was mentioned by a majority of students when they reflected in the post-survey about not only what they had learned from the class but also how they would prepare for speeches in the future.

Past Experiences. Sometimes past experiences impacted the way that students viewed the upcoming class as well as what they had learned in the class by the end of the semester. Numerous students noted something about their previous experience and how it was influencing their expectations for the class. One student (Mark, 19-year-old, White, female, freshman) said, "I am LDS so I frequently am asked to give speeches in church. I signed up for this class because I want to be better prepared." His post-survey comments did not refer to this expectation but did indicate the class had been useful in helping him learn how to outline and recognize his bad habits. Another student, John, an 18-year-old, White, male noted on the pre-survey that he wanted to "be more comfortable when giving speeches or talks in front of people." Again, his post-survey did not address this desire directly but instead focused on preparation.

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Some students referred to previous experience only in the post-survey. This student, while noting things they would do in preparation for future speaking assignments, also felt constrained by the class itself:

> I felt I couldn't really express myself in the way I wanted because I had to meet all of the requirements. We learned about many different patterns but really were pretty limited in what we could use. Have a better outline and practice more (Janelle, 38-year-old, White female, sophomore).

Her comments seemed to indicate that she had had experience using other types of patterns and ways of expressing herself. Lauren, a 20-year-old, White, female, sophomore also recognized skills she had learned while at the same time indicating that she may have struggled in the past and continues to do so after taking the class:

> I learned a lot of tactics to help me overcome my fear and anxiety associated with public speaking and performing the impromptu exercises did help with the overall anxiety. However, thinking about theoretical principles to apply vs. actually applying those tactics are very different and I still really struggle with public speaking even after all of the class assignments.

Finally, others felt that they already knew how to speak, and by the end, as mentioned in the table above, Sarah, a 19-year-old, White, female, freshman said, "I'll go back to winging my speeches, because that's how I feel most confident and sure." Another said in the post-survey that they would "continue to do the same thing I was doing before" (Nora, 21-year-old, White, female, sophomore). These students indicate they had had experience speaking before the class, and the course did not make an impact on their speech preparation skills.

Overall, at the beginning of the course students were mainly interested in learning skills or how to give a speech better. In the post-survey most were much more explicit about specific skills they had learned through taking the class.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to understand how students self-described their expectations and goals for learning in a basic communication course through pre-

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and post-test responses. Our findings suggest that students enter a basic communication course with expectations for their learning connected to communication skills and preparation. Recognizing that students have specific conceptions about the course as well as goals for their learning, both realistic and unrealistic, suggests a complexity in students' understanding for a basic communication course. Further, through examining pre- and post-test self-report data we contribute to understanding whether or not students' goals and expectations are met. In this discussion section, we reflect on our analysis, forward practical implications, and finally, address limitations and future directions.

Similar to previous research, our students were motivated by certain goals at the beginning of the semester (see Wigfield, 1997). They wanted to learn how to speak better, build personal and professional skills, and overcome anxiety about speaking in public. Students also wanted to be more confident in understanding debates, conveying information to an audience, and dealing with problems in their speeches and often related this confidence (or lack of) to their skill levels in these areas (Schunk et al., 2008, Zimmerman, 1989). Supporting Osorio et al. (2013) and Shi et al. (2015), we also found that students utilize self-talk both at the beginning and at the end of the course. Some indicated their confidence in being able to speak well at future events. Others noted that they still hated public speaking but felt like they could successfully present a speech.

Perhaps one of the most telling findings from the pre-test were expectations about what was going to happen and what students would get out of the course (Manski, 2004). Numerous students with an LDS background indicated they wanted to learn how to give better talks. In the LDS church, with a lay ministry, members of the congregation give small sermons, or talks, each week during church. Often these talks are very short and do not frequently follow typical speech patterns with references. These students, in noting they wanted to give better talks, were demonstrating an expectation that they would learn how to give this type of public speech better. However, many of these students expressed disappointment by the end of the semester that they had learned how to outline and present specific types of speeches (e.g., informative, persuasive) but had not learned how to give a better talk. This may indicate a disconnect between what is taught in a public speaking class and types of speeches that students are actually giving outside of the class whether it is a church talk or a business presentation.

Similar to Oliver (1993), students who had a slightly negative or positive expectation of what was going to happen in the class tended to have an overall

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positive experience. In the pre-test, most students were unable to identify specific skills they hoped to obtain from taking the class, instead noting general notions about hoping to "speak better." However, by the post-test, the majority of students felt positive about the class and were able to articulate skills they had learned such as outlining, writing, and practicing. Being more specific in what skills they had learned may be related to a more positive disconfirmation rather than a zero confirmation because not only did they meet their expectations, they now were able to give details and were positive about their class experience. Again, supporting Oliver (1993), students who had specific expectations at the beginning that were not met tended to have negative reactions in the post-survey such as "I'll go back to winging my speeches" or "I didn't learn how to give a good talk."

In contrast to previous research where students were motivated because of the people in the class (Covington & Müeller, 2001; Wigfield, 1997), we found that often students knew each other outside of the class because of a church relationship. In this case, many of the students were more anxious than motivated – they wanted to make a good impression on the people they knew from their church congregation. As such, this may reveal that some students feel more anxious or pre-occupied because of relationships outside of class and fail to develop content knowledge and preparation skills.

Practical Implications

An important implication of this study is understanding and recognizing that students have learning goals and perceptions of the course. This is an important reminder that students are not merely sponges or blank slates, but rather, enter our courses with previous experiences, both positive and negative. Understanding this can aid an instructor in reaching and connecting with students, thereby making the learning experience in the classroom more meaningful. Further, our study suggests that students are also able to articulate achievable goals and are motivated to realize these goals because they are connected to experiences outside of the classroom. Revealed through our analysis is the fact that students establish goals and seek to achieve more than being a "good public speaker." Our analysis also indicates that students described personal speaking goals connected with their religious affiliation or current or future employment goals–further reinforcing a call for instructors to understand the identity and cultural experiences of their students.

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Further, our study reveals that students have a wide range of personal or professional public speaking goals. While our analysis reveals that students have a variety of goals, our findings also reveal that only one student out of 792 indicated a desire to learn about preparing visual aids for presentations. This suggests that students either fail to associate developing the skill of preparing visual aids with public speaking, already feel confident in designing visual aids, or view developing visual aids as a secondary to other public speaking skills. As such, instructors could gain a better understanding of students' skills and motivations in order to more effectively tailor the course to meet their needs.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the contributions from this study, our findings should be interpreted with the following limitations in mind. Because of the nature of the questions asked in this study, it is possible that we unintentionally silenced students from self-reflecting on other, even more important goals or expectations related to public speaking. Because this was a self-report study in which students received course credit (although minimal), the timing of the survey may have influenced their goals and expectations in their self-defined responses. For example, it may be that students have other personal or professional goals related to public speaking that if better understood would assist instructors in making the course content and skills transferable. It is also possible that students who provided vague responses may not have had enough prior public speaking experiences or knowledge to articulate a meaningful goal.

Second, our recruitment resulted in a large number of White male students and fewer students from minority backgrounds. While our participant pool did include students from minority ethnic and racial backgrounds, the researchers highlight the need for increased and diligent attention to examine these minority experiences so that instructors may fully support students from diverse identity backgrounds. Additionally, even though we had a number of non-traditional students in our sample, most still represented the traditional college student age category. Future research would do well to examine the relationship, if any, among race, ethnicity, non-traditional, first generation status and learning goals related to a basic communication course, increasing the likelihood of making the course meaningful and transferable for students.

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Overall, our study reveals that there is more to understand from the self-defined goals and expectations, as well as the degree to which these are realized, by students. It appears that students seek to develop skills in the course that are transferable; however, they may not always understand at the end the course how to use these skills in personal or professional contexts. We see this as a call for instructors to scaffold learning to highlight the accessibility and transferability of skills to match also uniqueness of the student population (e.g., church callings; business conferences; angel investor meetings; interviews) thereby, making the class and course content transferable beyond the class.

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