Evaluating Empowerment Language During the First-Year Student Transition

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A primary function of orientation programming is to help students begin their adjustment by seeing themselves as a student at the institution; communication plays a significant role in achieving the goal. In consideration of foundational knowledge about adjustment and language, this study evaluates how well messages to incoming students empower their success by defining the institutional environment and the student role within the environment. Critical findings for the transition field relate to word choices and their influence on the perception of orientation, the potential for orientation to design meaningful communication experiences, and ways empowerment strategies might help with transitions.

Transition, Language, and Adjustment

The task of communicating with incoming students is a dual responsibility in which orientation programs serve both recruitment and retention functions (Hossler & Anderson, 2005). The critical nature of the communications that happen from acceptance through attendance merit evaluation. It is for this reason that many admissions offices conduct analyses of the frequency and mode of their communication (Supiano, 2016). Colleges and universities communicate with incoming students across a dynamic landscape of modalities; technology plays an adapting role due to the nature of the evolution of students' technological familiarity and preferences (Junco, 2005).

These considerations, however, neglect to examine the actual messages of communication pieces. In recognition of the power of language (Foucault, 1972) and the ways balancing power in the classroom can engage participation (Weimer, 2013), there is value in evaluating what is said, not just the mode. College student adjustment relates to institutional environment (Strange & Banning, 2015; Astin, 1991). This study aims to determine if there is a way to measure the empowerment strategies in the language of communication pieces and what relationship those strategies have with student adjustment.

Theoretical Framework

Student Adjustment

Orientation is an opportunity for students to develop a level of comfort with

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the institutional environment and understand the space they will occupy. Astin's (1991) Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) Model provides a framework because transition experiences are a direct intervention related to retention that is meant to expose students to the environment. Orientation programs attempt to assist the adjustment process by removing barriers, meeting milestones, and achieving a level of comfort at the institution (Hossler & Anderson, 2005).

Communication

Astin's (1991) input factor, for the purposes of this study, is the language context that a student brings to the lexicon of higher education. Ogden and Richards' (1989) Symbol-Referent model suggests that meaning is made by the recipient as much as the sender. Burke (1966) asserts that lived experiences influence the lens which an individual brings to the conversation. Therefore, experiences, or Astin's (1991) inputs, influence the recipient's interpretation of messages.

Empowerment Strategies

Foucault (1972) asserts that word choice, statements, and the access required to understand can inherently restrict or distribute power. He suggests including approaches to language that consider the audience, whether privileged knowledge is necessary, and whether recipients receive an invitation to participate (Foucault, 1972). Weimer (2013) has explored empowerment strategies in the college classroom; these strategies suggest that students thrive when they have choices, motivation, and autonomy to interact with knowledge through technology (Weimer, 2013).

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative inductive analysis is to identify a way to measure empowerment language and determine whether empowerment messaging appears in communications. A rubric, developed for the study, uses Foucault's conceptions of language and power and Weimer's strategies for balancing power in the classroom. The rubric (Figure 1) consists of ten categories, which rank words, phrases, and sentences on a ten-point scale from excellent to poor.

The study defines the scope of communications as those provided, for the timespan of acceptance to attendance, to all incoming, first-year students for autumn 2016 at a large, public, four-year university in the southeastern United States. Documents include letters, emails, online landing pages, video transcripts, and phone call scripts. The 19 documents meeting the criteria originated from six functional areas at the institution: admissions, orientation, financial aid, the Bursar's office, housing, and the department of First-Year and Transition Studies, which manages first-year seminars and learning communities.

Analysis of the 19 documents viewed them as one comprehensive communication from the institution, in consideration of the environment factor of Astin's (1991) model. Each document review consisted solely of the language; additional communication elements, such as visual or graphic items, were excluded from analysis. Documents were reviewed against the rubric for performance in each category and a word count analysis looked for repetition, consistency, and overall word usage throughout the 19 documents.

Data

Four primary themes and one emerging theme are evident through this study. They relate to word choices, empowerment strategies, and communication experiences.

The two themes related to the selection of words and phrases are as follows:
1. Language balance is found through the articulation of the meaning of terms as related to the student.
2. Word choice matters.

Language balance involves defining terms as what they are, what they do, and what they say.

Language balance is achieved when terms are specifically defined within the context of the specific institutional environment and also identify the relationship between an individual student and the term itself. Next, word choice was significant in each document because it defines communication intent and determines how appropriate, accessible, and restricted the information within the document is. More importantly, the word choice of one document influences the performance of word choices throughout the rest of the documents. For example, the word "register" was used 32 times. The majority of these uses represented the activity of enrolling in courses, but six of the uses were related to signing up to attend an event. "Orientation," used 60 times, places an emphasis on the event. In addition, the institution contradicted itself in naming the population, calling them "freshman" twice and "first-year students" 11 times.

The two themes related to empowerment strategies are as follows:
3. Ignoring timing and refusing further discourse builds process over relationship.
4. Empowerment thrives when choice includes participation and motivation.

The documents offered the locus of control to the recipient when the language acknowledged the timing of the message and explicitly explained when and how to interact. In some cases, recipients received an invitation to interact only if they had questions. In more empowering cases, an identified opportunity to ask questions and present plans at a very specific time was articulated. The messages were most empowering when they clearly outlined in an accessible way the choices a student

might make and explained the reasons for making those choices, followed by explicit directions for action.

The final, and emerging, theme is as follows:
  5. Communication experience matters.

This emerging theme is of particular importance to orientation programs. It is emerging because it was only present in seven video transcripts that are part of a pre-orientation digital experience. As a unit, the transcripts performed better on the rubric than the documents performed as a whole. The rankings of excellent and satisfactory were due to consistent word choices and emphasis on the environment through language balance, and also the innovative use of technology encouraging participation. Statements connected recipients to links, to other videos, or to interest forms directly. There is some indication that the intentional creation of this experience allowed empowerment strategies and empowerment language to peak.

Discussion

As a functional area on campus that brings the university together, orientation and transition departments are positioned to guide a conversation about empowerment messaging. In particular, these departments often create the communications, or the arena for the communications, that incoming students receive.

Orientation programs can construct communication pieces that, using language balance, help students begin to define the institutional environment, their role within it, and the experiences they will have before and after enrollment. Additionally, orientation can host conversations about appropriate terms and phrases, as well as ways to define the institution and students themselves. Orientation can also begin a conversation about the institutional lexicon and whether the usage of words is delivering contradictory, confusing, or over-emphasized messages. In particular, this study exposed the potential misconception that overemphasis of a program or service might create for incoming students. There is an opportunity to discuss how word and phrase choices with incoming students creates empowerment, because consistent terms allow recipients to define and therefore establish their own meaning.

The pre-orientation and orientation experience is ripe with decisions for students to make. Designing opportunities for choice using empowerment messaging gives recipients research-based merit for choices, as well as explicit directions for how to make choices. Such messaging also clarifies when they can discuss their choices with institutional professionals. Orientation often hosts the opportunities for interaction, and by explicitly describing how decision-making will occur at orientation, the strategy grants access and accountability to the student for selection.

Orientation and transition departments can explore the emerging theme of communication experience. If orientation programs intentionally weave together messages from different departments in ways that are meant to be integrated,

this may naturally open up opportunities that allow empowerment strategies to be employed. The rubric is available to assist the design of orientation-specific communication, and also to facilitate an exploration of the overall institutional message for students who are in the process of enrolling.

Conclusion

More exploration is necessary to further understand the impact of language on students as they are transitioning, and there is great potential in understanding the way language performs. Institutions invest in the development and design of interventions to assist students in their adjustment, so there is value in investing time in delivering messaging that is related to the environment. This is especially true if doing so can lead to advanced adjustment that might empower students to make decisions. Furthermore, the opportunity exists to define the institution through the creation of institutional lexicons that clarify the institutional environment and also offer students, with their varied context inputs, an opportunity to define themselves.

FIGURE 1

Wilhite's Rubric for Evaluating Language in First-Year Communication[1]

Developed using the theoretical knowledge of Foucault's Discursive Formations and Weimer's Balance of Power[2]

Evaluations of Language	Excellent	Satisfactory	Neutral	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Audience appropriate language	Language used is student-centered (Foucault)	Language used is mostly student-centered	It is unclear who the audience is	Language used is rarely student-centered	Language used is never student-centered
Communication intent is clear	Descriptive efficacy is evident in the formation of statements, concepts, and choices (Foucault)	Descriptive efficacy is evident in the formation of some statements, concepts, and choices	Evidence of descriptive efficacy is unclear	Descriptive efficacy is implied but not clearly evident	Descriptive efficacy is not present in the communication
Language choice	Information is presented using language that is developed, united, accessible, and presented without restriction (Foucault)	Information is presented using some developed, united, accessible, and unrestricted language	Information is presented using language that is neither developed or incomplete, united or divided, accessible or exclusive,	Information is presented using some language that is incomplete, divided, exclusive, or restricted	Information is presented using language that is incomplete, divided, exclusive, and restricted

[1]This rubric was created as an instrument for Kathryn Wilhite's qualitative thesis "An Exploratory Study of the Impact of Language on the Transition and Success of Students in Their First College Year"
This is the revised model for use in practice and research
[2]Foucault, M. (1972). The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language. New York, NY: Random House, Inc.
Weimer, M. (2013). Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

FIGURE 1 (cont.)

			restricted or unrestricted		
Language balance	Balance exists in the language between what it is, what it does, and what it says (Foucault)	Balance exists in the language between what it says and either what it does OR what it is	Language has elements of what it is and/or what it does	Language focus is mostly on what it says, with limited exploration of what it is or what it does	Language focus is entirely on what it says
Timing	Acknowledgement of timing of statements is evident as part of an ongoing exchange that does not constitute a terminal stage of discourse (Foucault & Weimer)	Timing of statements is either evident or implied and language used leaves continuation of discourse unknown	Timing is not clearly acknowledged and continuation of discourse is unknown	Timing is ignored and continuation of discourse is either not acknowledged or discouraged; terminal	Timing of statements is unrelated to any ongoing communication or timeline
Discourse	Language used invites discourse, seeks to take advantage of interaction, and remains within the dimension of discourse (Foucault & Weimer)	Language does not explicitly seek to invite further discourse or encourage further interaction but is open to further interaction	Language neither invites nor discourages further discourse	Language is utilized and further interaction is not invited	Language is not discursive, no intent for discourse or interaction is involved
Communication experience	Intentional design of a communication experience is evident and explicit (Weimer)	Intentional design of a communication experience is evident but not explicit	It is unclear whether a communication experience has been designed	Evidence and statement of a communication experience are lacking	Design of communication appears to be thoughtless and poorly constructed
Language provides choice	Information is designed to be broad with opportunities for individuals to choose from supplementary material for increased knowledge; technology is employed to assist with knowledge access (Weimer)	Information is fairly broad but occasionally specific and detailed; supplementary information is provided and technology is employed for some access	Some information is broad and some is specific and detailed; supplementary information OR access to supplementary information are either unclear or inaccessible	Information covers mostly specific and detailed topics; no supplementary information is provided OR that information does not effectively employ technology	All potentially pertinent information is specifically covered in full detail with no supplementary information because it is all provided at the forefront
Language invokes participation	Recipients are presented with choices that lead to active participation in decisions;	Recipients are presented with choices that lead to active participation in	Recipients are presented with choices and it is unclear where those choices	Recipients are presented with vastly limited choices and not informed of the	Recipients are provided with no choices; all steps are mandated

FIGURE 1 (cont.)

	recipients are instructed to make decisions and are explicitly entrusted with those decisions (Weimer)	decisions but it is unclear that they are required to make those decisions and/or entrusted to do so	lead and that responsibility and trust are present	responsibility or trust they are given in these choices	
Language provides motivation	Communication encourages and engages recipients with opportunities to develop college transition skills (Weimer)	Communication encourages recipients to develop college transition skills	Communication neither encourages nor discourages recipients to develop college transition skills	Communication discourages recipients from developing their own college transition skills	Communication discourages recipients from developing their own college transition skills and undermines ones connection to their own transition

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