



## Let's Talk: Learning to Communicate Well in Emergency Online Learning

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### **Author Biography**

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# 2021 Pedagogicon Proceedings

## Let's Talk: Learning to Communicate Well in Emergency Online Learning

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*In this article, we use the lens of Tinto's (1987) separation and transition phases to reflect on lessons learned when moving classes with oral communication components from in-person to online. We believe that being mindful and intentional in how we include oral communication instruction, opportunities for improvement, and incorporating feedback can positively impact retention and persistence of students. First, we describe the timelines of events, then we connect Tinto's essential features of effective retention programs to oral communication pedagogy, and finally offer resources and strategies for incorporating oral communication into courses.*

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### **A Strong Foundation**

As academics in the field of communication studies, we are in the practice of balancing our course teachings with the demands of administering a high-profile, fast-paced communication center employing 47 students. Since its inception in 2002, the University of North Carolina Greensboro Speaking Center has supported students, staff, and faculty in their ongoing process of becoming more confident and competent oral communicators. As a practical application of our founding director's doctoral dissertation, our center is situated in a pedagogically and theoretically sound framework (Gunn, 2002). This strong foundation and our recognition and effort to embrace the changes, challenges, and needs that arise has led to being widely recognized as a national model on many fronts.

### **A Pandemic Hits**

At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, our speaking center provides consultation support and instructional services for students, faculty, and those in the local community. We are staffed with over 45 undergraduate and graduate consultants and three faculty members who support speakers in their ongoing process of becoming more confident and competent communicators. So when we returned from spring break on Monday, March 9, 2020, we already had a plan for operating online with our student-staff teleworking as we were paying

close attention to the virus and the spread from the Far east. On March 11, 2020, when the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, we moved our center's operations to 100% online and two days later had a fully teleworking staff.

On March 12, the university announced we would leave campus for the remainder of the semester. This experience essentially forced Tinto's (1987) separation and transition phases (that college students go through) to play out in reverse. These phases help to understand the challenges of student retention and persistence that arise from a disturbance in education and the negative implications and impacts of a pandemic. When we were moved online, many of our students were evicted from their campus housing and forced to move back to their childhood homes- no longer separated from household obstacles and no longer learning to transition into an independent life. Everything about college life was upended for masses of students, yet courses continued, our campus support centers remained open, and instructors kept teaching. So, it was important to reflect on ways to mitigate the negative effects of this reversal.

## **Making it Work**

With the speaking center's workflow adjusted, we focused on emergency remote teaching and learning for our own classes as the University was closed for a week. At the time, two of us were co-teaching the center's face-to-face theory and practice course that students take to become staff members. One of us had just started teaching a seven-week face-to-face course in which students would tell family stories, and another was teaching a 16-week course focused on workplace relationships. The third had just finished a 7.5 week online introductory course and was teaching three 16-week, face-to-face introductory courses and a one-hour large lecture section.

Even after the week of prep was over, we found a need to continue adjusting our courses as many of the traditional ways of presenting in the classroom would not work online. Maloney and Kim (2020) stated rather succinctly that remote learning "was complex, challenging, and exhausting for all involved, faculty and students alike. It required more time, more effort, and constant adjustments" (para. 4). Yet, we forged ahead.

## **Pedagogy of Oral Communication**

### *Instruction and Opportunities*

We remained committed to providing our students with instruction, feedback, and opportunities for every oral communication activity assigned. As we further

adjusted, fewer opportunities for feedback and opportunities remained because many students struggled with technology, family life, and work schedules. We began to see that with limited opportunities and feedback, instruction became imperative.

Researchers have demonstrated that adding intentional instruction affords students the capacity to perform important tasks associated with succeeding across all courses. Examples include properly paraphrasing in academic writing (Schwabl et al., 2013), critical thinking and critical writing (Ahmed, 2018), and critical reading (Bosley, 2008). Regardless of what course a student is taking, if the demonstration of course knowledge and/or participation in the development of it hinges on the ability to do any specific task(s) correctly, the absence of instruction does not improve the student's ability (Gula et al. 2015). When we ask students to demonstrate essential capacities such as critical thinking and writing, paraphrasing, and engaging in oral communication activities for which we provide no instruction, we can expect poor performance and no improvement in their ability. Zakrajsek (2017) claims that creating a safe classroom that encourages students to take the risk of participating in class discussions is the most important factor in their choice to participate. We find that when students are expected to participate in oral communication activities like classroom discussions, the benefit of the risk is best when students are also provided with instruction, at a minimum.

What stands out is the reinforced understanding that students need clear instruction if they are to demonstrate course knowledge or participate in the development of knowledge. Instruction should also be reinforced in various modes as some students might not attend the class or watch the instructional video. Adding a discussion board to have students post a question about the assignment, sending a message via your learning management system (LMS) with instructions, or having students type their plans for the assignment could be additional ways to reinforce the instruction delivered in the lesson. Even better pedagogy includes feedback and multiple practice opportunities to take risks towards improvement.

### *Feedback and Opportunity*

While instruction is essential, it is much more effective when coupled with feedback and opportunities. Colvin et al.(1993) found that the management of academic errors (such as undesirable grades) can be improved by providing feedback that an error had occurred, giving information on how to correct the response, offering an opportunity to repeat the task, and reinforcing the

correct response/action. Effective teachers should give explicit instruction of new material with direct teaching and modeling, offer feedback to students on how to correct errors by stating the correct response or modeling how to do the process, and then provide repeated opportunities for practice (Carnine et al., 2006). As it relates to oral communication, instruction is essential, but it should be followed by feedback on any presentation, so the student is aware of competencies demonstrated and opportunities for further improvement on their next presentation opportunity.

## **Retention Connection**

### *Institutional Commitment*

Providing students with instruction, feedback, and opportunities to develop academic skills involving oral communication aligns with Tinto's (1987, 1993, 2003) essential features of effective retention programs. The first feature, institutional commitment to students, calls upon faculty and staff to continually reflect on how actions are taken to further student welfare. Faculty across campus assign students to participate or lead class discussions, present a formal speech, work in groups, or perform information gathering interviews, and more.

At our institution, the "speaking intensive" committee (which the authors are a part of) reviewed course proposals to integrate oral communication from 2003-2020. Most proposals lacked a plan for instruction in the course calendar. Institutional commitment to students cannot be met until, or unless, student-centered learning is privileged. Although our focus is on curriculum, the same can be demonstrated when campus activity student groups and student researchers are tasked with oral communication activities. It is possible to demonstrate an institutional commitment to student learning when students are given opportunities to learn what it means to do what is being asked of them.

### *Educational Commitment*

Tinto's second feature of effective retention programs is educational commitment. He argues that it is not mere retention that we should be measuring to prove the effectiveness of programming but instead measure student intellectual and social growth (student education) as evidence of providing effective retention efforts. Tinto (2003) specifically calls for students to receive "early, direct, and frequent feedback" (p. 7). Feedback can be provided from a myriad of sources and through numerous channels.

### *Social and Intellectual Community*

The final feature of effective retention programs presented by Tinto (2003) is the social and intellectual community. Among Tinto's ideas is seeing "successful student participation as a vehicle both to individual learning and to membership in supportive college communities generally" (p. 8). Our classrooms (online and otherwise) represent college communities. This is where providing opportunities to develop competencies aligns with retention ideas. Students' oral communication growth can be measured in the classroom as they participate in multiple opportunities throughout the course.

Feedback is also an opportunity to further social and intellectual community building. Thus, incorporating multiple instances of feedback from instructors, peers, and other available resources can increase students' perceptions of being supported and connected. In turn, the likelihood of retention and persistence is improved. Tinto (1993) writes, "Simply put, the same forces of contact and involvement that influence persistence also appears to shape student learning" (p. 69). The elements of sound oral communication pedagogy all connect with Tinto's (1987, 1993, 2003) essential features of an effective retention program, so the importance of the inclusion of instruction, opportunities for improvement, and feedback cannot be overstated.

### **Resources and Strategies**

We advocate for clear instruction and, even when faced with the challenges of online learning in a pandemic, we see no reason for faculty to forgo feedback and opportunities either. To that end, the online support we offer at our Center ([speakingcenter.uncg.edu](http://speakingcenter.uncg.edu)) can allow integration of all three into an LMS or shared Google folders regardless of how a course is offered (f2f, online, hybrid, high flex). Our webpage features open resources for any faculty member to use for instructional purposes and resources to engage students.

### *Instruction*

Our website includes a library of Center-created resources drawn on and synthesized from various communication research sources. At this time, our collection predominantly consists of static pdf tipsheets. We periodically update the materials to ensure our resources are drawn from current research and best practices. However, as we have learned, multimodal delivery of content is greatly needed, so we have been turning, and continue to turn, content into other

forms such as whiteboard videos, narrated Prezi and PowerPoint presentations, infographics, podcasts, etc.

Pedagogically we know that a workshop structure in which the instructor presents small bursts of content followed by an application activity and debrief is highly effective. We believe that this same concept can be applied in a virtual class. We have increased our use of short videos, podcasts, or other brief instructional content that we follow up with low-stakes assignments and activities such as a quiz or a discussion board activity. The videos are not intended to substitute for course reading, but give students who do not or cannot complete the readings exposure to the instruction. For instructors who need to incorporate oral communication instruction, there are microlearning resources.

In addition to instructional resources created by our center, we also curate resources from other sources and add links to these resources for ease of access. One excellent resource is the National Communication Association's (NCA) teaching and learning collection. There are resources for oral communication instruction, opportunities, and feedback. Two additional open access resources we recommend are the public speaking project (2013) and Wrench, Punyanunt-Carter, and Thweatt (2020).

### *Opportunities*

The pandemic forced us, and higher ed in general, to become creative and adaptive to the various modes of course delivery as faculty desired these less traditional options. Of course, more traditional assignments and activities like live public speaking presentations are still highly valuable; here we primarily point to other types. Our website includes a section that deals specifically with mediated communication, such as tips for presenting on camera, online interviewing, and podcasting. NCA also has a page devoted to online course assignments. Discussion boards have been utilized in LMS platforms and are still a valuable way to facilitate the social and intellectual community. We recommend Berry & Kowal (2019), Lieberman (2019), Mintz (2020), and a Pearson (2020) blog post.

### *Feedback*

Faculty across campus who assign oral communication activities can provide feedback themselves by modeling how to give effective feedback and/or teach their students to provide one another feedback. The implementation of peer feedback in the scaffolding/drafting process of assignments can be beneficial for the student receiving the feedback as well as the student reviewing the



materials. In the process of reviewing their classmates' work, students can reflect on their own work. A strategically designed peer-review assignment that asks students to look at specific elements of the artifact they are reviewing can serve as reinforcement to previous instruction. Instructors can also allow low-stakes opportunities to practice giving feedback on videos from former students or other freely available videos online.

Another strategy is to assign self-evaluations and reflections, which we also view as a form of feedback. As with peer feedback, self-evaluations are most effective when the student is guided in their reflection by specific questions and prompts that direct the student to observe areas that correlate with the learning objectives of the assignment.

As with instruction, the use of multi-modalities of providing feedback can be equally useful. Instructors can provide their feedback in the form of written feedback and also incorporate video or audio feedback. They can also assign students to do recorded responses to peers or complete self-evaluations in the form of letters to their future selves. The activity of feedback can be used as a creative and powerful vehicle for strengthening participation and engagement in an online course. In addition to tip sheets on feedback on our webpage, we recommend Wind (2018) and Centre for Teaching Excellence (n.d.).

## Conclusion

We hope that instructors who incorporate oral communication into their courses will find the lessons we have learned at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resources and strategies we have offered here useful. Of course, if you have a communication center on your campus, we encourage you to turn to them for help with instruction, opportunities, and feedback. Like students, faculty benefit from social and intellectual community building.

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