

Measuring the Impact of Course Modality on Student Knowledge, Performance and Communication Apprehension in Public Speaking Pedagogy

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This research explores how integrating course modality changes through blended learning technologies impacts the framework of public speaking curriculum. Public Speaking is a unique area of study, as it involves a large number of student performances, requires a small class size, and incites increased communication apprehension in students. Authors of this study incorporated a blended learning course change to tackle these challenges. Through quantitative assessment comparing student knowledge, performance/skills, and communication apprehension between a blended course modality versus traditional face-to-face classes, more is understood regarding the impact of modality on public speaking pedagogy. Results of this study demonstrate how a blended learning modality of instruction is able to enhance the quality of instruction, specifically by increasing student knowledge, improving performance/skills, and lowering communication apprehension. Challenges of hybrid modality are also discussed.

Keywords: Hybrid classroom, blended learning, modality assessment, distance education, public speaking instruction

The study of public speaking and rhetoric is one of the most traditional areas of study in university education (Parker, 1967; Rorty, 1996). While much of the historical foundations of Public Speaking stem from Aristotle and Greek philosophy, there have been many calls for updating pedagogy (Haynes, 1990; McCroskey, 1981; Rowan, 1995). However, there are many unique challenges in teaching the course, including limited class size, balancing course concepts and student performances, and managing high levels of student apprehension. This study examines how integrating course modality changes through blended learning technologies impacts the framework of public speaking curriculum, student knowledge, speaking performances, and student apprehension.

Many universities include public speaking as an introductory prerequisite course for all students to take as a part of a larger general education curriculum (Cotellese, Bornak, & Davidson, 2015; Lefebvre, Dean & Pfaff, 2004). Students must take the course regardless of discipline or career interests. The makeup of a public speaking class is often comprised of diverse students from various grade levels, skills, and academic arenas, making it one of the most engaging and stimulating courses to teach. However, its unique subject area presents challenges to designing innovative contemporary pedagogy.

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Challenges of Public Speaking Pedagogy

By definition, public speaking is an area of communication where a speaker presents a formal presentation to an audience in the public domain (Sellnow, 2005). Therefore, the basic assumption of Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development," where educators share knowledge, expertise, and experience with the learner, is challenged. Students must be given substantial class time to develop, practice and demonstrate communication behavior through public speaking performances. Additionally, students must master basic theory and knowledge of public speaking concepts. This integration of teaching theory and facilitation of performance can often cause tension in course design (Levasseur, Dean & Pfaff, 2004; McCroskey, 1982). Faculty must make critical decisions about how much time is designated to course lectures and student speaking practice.

Given the substantial amount of course time dedicated to speaking practice and performances, educators are forced to decrease the amount of students enrolled in a public speaking class. The National Communication Association advises public speaking courses to have no more than 25 students enrolled per instructor (NCA, 2011). This smaller class size leads to a more positive and intimate classroom environment that helps a public speaking course succeed. Research demonstrates how a community atmosphere in the classroom reports a stronger will to learn, better performance, and more positive feelings towards school (Battistich, et al., 1995; Glaser & Bingham, 2012; McGrath et al., 2000). Given the high level of personal self-disclosure in speaking performances, students must feel as though they know and trust their classmates. When this "zone of proximal development" is flipped (Vygotsky's, 1978), students are prompted to share knowledge, expertise, and experience with their instructor and peers, rather than instructors being the sole source of cognition.

Unfortunately, as universities around the world look to increase class size in efforts to save money and campus resources, this low enrollment target puts an extra strain on communication departments. More programs are exploring ways to offer Public Speaking through distance education modalities in order to meet the same goals as traditional face-to-face courses (Cotellese, Bornak, & Davidson, 2015). It is unclear what impact raising enrollment numbers in public speaking courses through distance education initiatives has on student learning outcomes.

Public speaking is also a course that brings high levels of communication apprehension for some students, especially given that it is a subject many students feel forced into early in their academic career. Public speaking performances usually involve mental and physical presentations that require physical and mental skills, especially in areas of mindfulness, organization, skills and experience (Fujishin, 2009). Educators must spend a significant amount of class time treating apprehensive students, teaching techniques to decrease anxiety, helping students prepare and practice their speaking skills, and creating a classroom environment that fosters community and repertoire (Holley, & Steiner, 2005; Motley, 1990; Robinson, 1997). This public practice is important, and it cannot be assumed that students with speaking anxiety will train independently.

Distance education has emerged as a possible solution to tackling some of these challenges to public speaking pedagogy. Many variations of distance education have emerged, but in sum, online learning allows the student and instructor to be physically distant while learning, while maintaining communication through computer mediated communication (Beldarrain, 2006; Keegan, 1986). Courses can be offered fully online, completely face-to-face with specific assignments enhanced through the use of technology, or through blended learning techniques. This study demonstrates one university's attempt

to tackle the challenges of creating additional knowledge and skills training, increase class size, and lower student apprehension in public speaking courses through a blended learning curriculum. Specifically, this study reports the assessment results of the experience.

Blended Learning and Public Speaking Pedagogy

Using distance education as a resource in increasing class sizes may be something that more universities are forced into. The mandate often comes from the top in order to decrease the cost of program delivery, overcome problems of time-constraints, and free university resources (Hanson, & Teven, 2004; Heeger, 2007; Ibrahim & Yusoff, 2012). Blended learning provides a strong alternative to faculty who are resistant to teach courses online while their students remain on campus. It also addresses the concern that we focus as much on the quality as well as the utility of online offerings (Schwartzman, 2007; Vanhorn, Pearson & Child, 2008).

Blended learning combines online experiences (asynchronous) with face-to-face learning (synchronous) in order to improve student learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). The amount of class time delegated online varies depending on the blended learning class, but most research supports the claim that blending online instruction and in-class activities results in improved learning, as it helps improve student engagement with material and offers students more flexibility and convenience with scheduling (Authors to be added after review, 2014; Missildine, Fountain, Summers & Gosselin, 2013; Moran, Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Rovai & Jordan, 2004).

One of the greatest critiques of distance education is the difficulty in maintaining a close and intimate classroom environment. Often, students perceive the relationship between teachers and students in an online environment to be more formal, taking students a longer time to feel trust (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Feeling a sense of community trust with faculty and peers is critical in a public speaking course. However, blended course modality often generates stronger community feelings vs. fully online courses (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Blended learning has the capabilities to facilitate community dimensions, including transactional dialogue, instructor presence, and emotional connectedness between peers (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Specifically, distance education has demonstrated the ability to increase class size while maintaining the same level of knowledge retention.

Universities that have used blended learning as a way to increase class numbers in public speaking courses have mixed results. Some have found blended learning public speaking courses to have no significant student ability differences between distance education and face-to-face sections (Authors to be added after review, 2014; Clark and Jones, 2001). Other studies have actually found online students to score higher on their final exams than face-to-face students (Hanson & Tedan, 2004). Students' perceptions are consistent with these findings, as one study found that students report feeling as though learning outcomes were equal to or greater than a face-to-face version of the same course (Linardopoulos, 2010). However, these studies are becoming dated, with limited longitudinal data recorded.

Research also demonstrates how using advanced technology in the classroom lowers communication apprehension in students. Since distance education offers students more flexibility and convenience, it provides more time for students to practice speech performances. Practice is essential in reducing speech anxiety and developing public speaking skills. Practice allows individuals to identify and improve speech challenges before performance delivery and enhances familiarity with speech performance and the public speaking environment. (Fujishin, 2009; Ibrahim & Yusoff, 2012; O'Hair, Stewart & Rubenstein, 2001).

Moreover, one study using digital technology in the public speaking classroom found online tools to significantly decrease communication apprehension, especially for students with high levels of communication apprehension who are often the first to drop out of courses (Leeds & Maurer, 2009). While this is promising for a course often associated with feelings of embarrassment and discomfort, no research found directly measures the impact of a blended learning modality on communication apprehension.

Based on this literature, the authors of this study aim to assess student learning outcomes in blended public speaking course sections compared to regular face-to-face sections. The assessment model follows the National Communication Association's (NCA, 2011) recommendation that assessment of public speaking courses should include three components – cognitive, behavioral, and affective.

RQ1: How do blended learning sections of Public Speaking perform on knowledge measures compared to face-to-face sections?

RQ2: How do blended learning sections of Public speaking perform in skills/behavioral measures compared to face-to-face sections?

RQ3: What impact does course modality have on communication apprehension in students regarding public speaking performance?

Methodology

Public Speaking Course Creation

The blended learning public speaking class was developed due to a university strategic initiative designed to expand distance education offerings. This initiative called for engaging students in alternative distance learning environments, expanding technology use, and making learning accessible to students who may have difficulty attending face-to-face classes. Additionally, the course helped alleviate some campus space limitations on campus.

A team of five faculty members worked together to design the course. There were long discussions on the logistics of delivering the course, such as how online units, quizzes, discussion forums, and face-to-face time would be sequenced and utilized. The model of “flipping the classroom” (Baker, 2000; Bergmann and Sams, 2012) was useful in guiding the process. The final design used was to have students finish an online learning module in preparation for face-to-face sessions. Modules covered material normally given in lecture format. Each lecture related to one or more chapters of the class textbook. All faculty members participated in creating content for online modules, each of which had between 3-5 videos and corresponding online quizzes. They then reviewed the content for each video before it was recorded, and faculty all recorded lectures. This allowed students to view a variety of faculty throughout the semester. Videos were edited using Camtasia software, and a lot of effort was spent in making sure they were of high quality. Each online section was designed to be large, with 100 students enrolled. Online attendance was based on completion of the module, and each module had several videos which had graded quizzes at the end. Students also met two times a week for 50 minutes of face-to-face time. Each face-to-face section had no more than 25 students. Thus, the model was 1/3 online, and 2/3 face-to-face. The greater portion of the class was face-to-face to work on hands-on activities in speech preparation, as well as for delivering speeches.

Study Design

Assessment was done to compare student knowledge, performance/skills, and communication apprehension between the new blended course versus traditional face-to-face courses. As mentioned earlier, the three National Communication Association public speaking assessment components were measured – cognitive, behavioral, and affective (NCA, 2011). Student knowledge and performance are direct measures; communication apprehension is an indirect measure.

Assessment Plan

A quasi-experimental design was used to compare sections of a blended vs. face-to-face course. Sections were offered in the same semester (Spring 2016), as well as textbook and assignments, course syllabi, speech rubric, and grading breakdown (60% speeches; 40% tests). In-class mid-term and final exams were administered in both course modalities, and multiple-choice questions of common knowledge were measured. Each measure was administered twice during the semester. They are described in detail below.

Measurements

Direct Cognitive Measure – Students took in-class knowledge tests to measure public speaking concepts. The pre-measures were taken immediately after add/drop, and the post measures were taken as part of the final exam. Five questions tested students' knowledge of three vital factors of a speech: content (sources), organization (thesis and transition) and delivery (extemporaneous speaking and eye contact). The benchmark goal was set at 75% (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2007).

Direct Measure– Behavioral. The department uses a common speech evaluation form to assess the progress of students in demonstrating mastery of the three key areas of speech presentation. Faculty evaluated five measures of speech performance, namely: students' effectiveness in developing a clear thesis statement (organization), transition (organization), students' incorporation of proper source citations (content), proper use of limited notes/extemporaneous speaking (delivery), and students' ability to maintain effective eye contact (delivery). These measures match the knowledge questions. The 5-point rubric identified 5 = excellent, 4 = very good, 3 = competent, 2 = needs improvement, and 1 = very poor. The benchmark goal for these measures was also set at 75% of students rated as "excellent," "very good," or "competent." The pre measure was the informative speech, and the post measure was the persuasive speech.

Indirect Measure– Affective students' perception of their apprehension toward public speaking was measured by McCroskey's *Personal Report of Communication Apprehension*(PRCA). Higher scores indicate higher apprehension. A score above 18 represents high levels of anxiety. The pre-measure was taken immediately after add/drop, and the post-measure was taken during the last day of class. This scale has been shown to be reliable and valid (Rubin, Palmgreen, and Sypher, 2004).

Participants

There were 190 students in face-to-face sections; 113 students in the blended learning sections were included in the study. In the tables below where pre and post measures are presented, only students with both pre and post measures were included in the analysis.

Results

Knowledge Measures

RQ1 asked how blended learning sections perform on knowledge measures compared to face-to-face sections. Table 1 compares post measures of knowledge between students in the two modalities. The post measure results comparing knowledge items of face-to-face sections with blended learning sections showed blended learning students performing better on three items. It is important to note that for four measures, blended learning sections met or came within a couple of percentage points below the benchmark of 75%. For face-to-face classes, 4 out of 5 post measures did not meet the 75% minimum benchmark set by the Middle States Commission.

Table 1. Knowledge-Face-to-face vs. blended post measure

Per cent Correct			
Question	Face to face – post measure	Blended post measure	χ^2 test
Number	181	113	
<i>Content</i>			
1 (Source citation)	117 (64.6%)	98 (86.7%)	$\chi^2 = 17.267$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$
<i>Delivery</i>			
2 (Extemporaneous delivery)	97 (53.6%)	83 (73.5%)	$\chi^2 = 11.558$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$
3 (Eye contact)	89 (49.2%)	80 (70.8%)	$\chi^2 = 13.312$, $df = 1$, $p < .000$
<i>Organization</i>			
4 (Transition)	161 (89.0%)	100 (88.5%)	$\chi^2 = 0.014$, $df = 1$, $p < ns$
5 (Thesis statement)	122 (67.4%)	87 (77.0%)	$\chi^2 = 3.112$, $df = 1$, $p < ns$

Tables 2 and 3 show pre and post measures for each modality. Each group began with most measures below the benchmark, which is to be expected since this was before regular instruction began. There were significant improvements in both groups for most of the knowledge items measured from the first measure to the second measure. However, face to face classes did not meet the benchmark for four items in the post measure, while blended sections did not meet benchmark for two items.

Table 2. Knowledge-face-to-face pre and post measure

Per cent Correct			
Question	Face to face – pre measure	Face to face – post measure	Paired sample t-test
Number	174	174	
<i>Content</i>			
1 (Source citation) (n=173)	46.2%	64.7%	t(172) = -4.05, p<.000
<i>Delivery</i>			
2 (Extemporaneous delivery)	37.4%	54.0%	t(173) = -3.667, p<.000
3 (Eye contact)	41.4%	47.7%	t(173) = -1.347, p<ns
<i>Organization</i>			
4 (Transition)	73.4%	88.5%	t(173) = -3.591, p<.000
5 (Thesis statement)	54.6%	66.7%	t(173) = -2.531, p<.01

Table 3. Knowledge- blended learning pre and post measure

Per cent Correct			
Question	Blended learning pre measure	Blended learning post measure	Paired sample t-test
Number	113	113	
<i>Content</i>			
1 (Source citation)	70.0%	86.7%	t(112) = -5.002, p<.000
<i>Delivery</i>			
2 (Extemporaneous delivery)	47.8%	73.5%	t(112) = -4.187, p<.000
3 (Eye contact)	54.9%	70.8%	t(112) = -3.113, p<.002
<i>Organization</i>			
4 (Transition)	62.8%	88.5%	t(112) = -4.842, p<.000
5 (Thesis statement)	46.9%	77.0%	t(112) = -5.237, p<.000

Behavioral Measures

RQ 2 asked how students in the blended learning sections perform on skills measures vs. face-to-face sections. Results indicate the mean scores of performance measures, whether significant differences between modalities exist, and between pre and post measures for each modality. The tables also show the percent of students who received an excellent/competent score. This is because it is important to see the proportion of students who achieved the benchmark for the target behavior.

Table 4 shows significant differences in three measures for the post measure between the two modalities. Specifically, the blended learning sections scored significantly higher on extemporaneous speaking, eye contact, and thesis. Notably, both face-to-face and blended learning sections met the benchmark of 75 per cent who were rated from 3-5 (Excellent, above average, and competent) on the rating scale for all five measures.

Table 4. Speech performance--Face to face vs. blended learning post measure

Question	Face to face post measure	Blended learning post measure	Independent sample t-test
Number	188/189	108/110	
<i>Content</i>			
Source citation (mean)	4.17	4.16	t(297) = 0.044, p<ns
Excellent-competent (%)	87.8	97.3	
<i>Delivery</i>			
Extemporaneous speaking (mean))	3.85	4.43	t(294) = -4.71, p<.000
Excellent-competent (%)	86.2	98.1	
Eye contact (mean)	3.95	4.47	t(296) = -4.26, p<.000
Excellent-competent (%)	89.4	97.2	
<i>Organization</i>			
Transition (mean	4.35	4.15	t(296) = 1.572, p<ns
Excellent-competent (%)	95.2	93.4	
Thesis (mean)	4.56	4.86	t(297) = -3.303, p<.001
Excellent-competent (%)	97.9	98.2	

Both face-to-face and blended sections showed significant improvements from the pre to the post measures. As Table 5 shows, there were significant improvements in all measures from the first to the second speech in the face-to-face sections. Students met the 75% benchmark of competency for all measures. In Table 6, results show that blended learning sections performed better in three performance measures from the first to the second measure. In one item - transition - the pre measure was already above a 4.0 average, and improved slightly in the post measure. For other items, the pre measures averaged below 4.0, and these levels were raised to above 4.0 in the second measure. Students met the 75% benchmark of competency for all measures.

Table 5. Speech performance--Face to face pre and post measure

Question	Face to face pre measure	Face to face post measure	Paired sample t-test
Number	182/183	182/183	
<i>Content</i>			
Source citation (mean)	3.58	4.14	t(181) = -4.612, p<.000
Excellent-competent (%)	64	87.8	
<i>Delivery</i>			
Extemporaneous speaking (mean)	3.18	3.84	t(181) = -6.407, p<.000
Excellent-competent (%)	46.2	86.2	
Eye contact (mean)	3.46	3.94	t(182) = -5.192, p<.000
Excellent-competent (%)	72.3	89.4	
<i>Organization</i>			
Transition (mean)	4.02	4.33	t(181) = -3.60, p<..000
Excellent-competent (%)	87	95.2	
Thesis (mean)	3.97	4.55	t(182) = -5.805, p<..000
Excellent-competent (%)	61.4	97.9	

Table 6. Speech performance-Blended learning pre and post

Question	Blended learning pre measure	Blended learning post measure	Paired sample t-test
Number	92	92	
<i>Content</i>			
Source citation (mean)	3.20	4.03	t(91) = -5.18, p<.000
Excellent-competent (%)	53.3	97.3	
<i>Delivery</i>			
Extemporaneous speaking (mean)	3.84	4.40	t(91) = -4.525, p<.000
Excellent-competent (%)	94.5	98.1	
Eye contact (mean)	3.35	4.43	t(91) = -8.679, p<.000
Excellent-competent (%)	79.3	97.2	
<i>Organization</i>			
Transition (mean)	3.85	4.04	t(91) = -1.178, p<ns
Excellent-competent (%)	94.6	93.6	
Thesis (mean)	4.75	4.85	t(91) = -0.877, p<ns
Excellent-competent (%)	97.8	98.2	

Affective—Communication Apprehension

RQ 3 asked what impact course modality has on communication apprehension in students regarding public speaking performance. The *Personal Report of Communication Apprehension* self-report scale was used to measure speech anxiety levels. Table 7 shows that students in blended sections had significantly lower PRCA scores in the second measure. (Lower scores represent lower anxiety.) However, both groups had scores which were lower than the benchmark of 18 (which represents high levels of anxiety).

Table 7. PRCA face to face vs. blended learning post measure

	PRCA scores (lower means less apprehension)		
	Face to face post measure (n=182)	Blended learning post measure (n=110)	Independent sample t-test
Mean (sd)	17.0 (5.13)	15.8 (3.87)	t(290) = 2.294, p<.02

Tables 8 and 9 show that both face-to-face and blended learning groups had significant decreases in levels of apprehension from the first measure to the second measure, with both beginning from 19-20, and going down 3-4 points on the scale. As can be seen in Table 7, however, blended students had significantly lower apprehension by semester's end.

Table 8. PRCA face to face pre and post measure

	PRCA scores (lower means less apprehension) (n=176)		
	Face to face pre measure	Face to face post measure	Paired sample t-test
Mean (sd)	19.82 (4.82)	16.9 (5.18)	t(175) = 7.305, p<.000

Table 9. PRCA blended learning pre and post measure

PRCA scores (lower means less apprehension) (n=108)			
	Blended learning pre measure	Blended learning post measure	Paired sample t-test
Mean (sd)	19.75 (4.89)	15.7 (3.9)	$t(107) = 8.24, p < .000$

Discussion

On all three components measured—cognitive, behavioral, and affective—students in blended sections performed better than or on par with face-to-face students. Blended students performed better in three knowledge measures and three speech behavioral measures. They also had lower anxiety levels at the end of the semester. It should be noted that from the first to the second period, significant improvements were observed in both groups of students for most of the cognitive and behavioral items, as well as significantly lower anxiety. Nonetheless, students in both modalities did not quite meet benchmark goals for all the knowledge items. Therefore, both modalities of teaching were generally successful for skills development and anxiety reduction, but both need some improvement in achieving knowledge gains.

A focus group was held at the conclusion of the semester with four students enrolled in blended sections to better understand their experience in the new course. In general, students expressed that they liked the class and format. In particular, each individual student said that he or she liked the freedom of time. Especially since this is a general education class, when students have classes in their majors, they expressed that it was nice to have more flexibility with a general education class. One student said that when she got home really late, she appreciated that she could schedule her own time to work on the videos, even at 11 o'clock at night. All four said that they did better on grades because they could review videos as often and when they liked.

In addition, all four students agreed that the technology was “super easy to follow,” even for a student who was not good with technology. Students liked having a variety of professors. They commented that none of them was just monotone or boring. The young man could not believe this was the first time running the class and, was “shocked at how well it was implemented.”

Students agreed that they like the blended learning format even better than they think they would like a totally distance format, because they saw the value of giving the speeches in class in front of an audience. When asked whether they might want to do an online presentation, one student said that that would be good because this is the way the world is going. Another said that she had a recent interview online, which was “weird,” and she wished that she had had some practice.

Conclusion

This research illustrates how a blended learning format of public speaking provides unique opportunities and some challenges in meeting the needs of today's educational environment. In particular, the ability to enhance knowledge, performance/skills, and communication apprehension through a blended learning course is demonstrated. Faculties were able to increase class size and maintain and improve many aspects of the course.

This research found significant improvements in most knowledge measures in a blended learning modality. One possible reason for the improvement is the asynchronous nature of blended learning online modalities. Using video lectures allows students the ability to review lecture data as often as they like because they are available through a course module system. Videos include reliable and high quality content and do not vary randomly from one delivery moment to the next.

The ability to demonstrate skill attainment is also enhanced in the blended learning format, specifically extemporaneous presentation, eye contact, and thesis statement. This may be a result of increased class time dedicated to practice and performance, since formal lecturing is taken out of the in-class equation. Apprehension is lowered perhaps as a result of more class time spent in interactive work, and the use of a lecture modality that lowers student anxiety about capturing information on the first pass. Embedded review questions further allow students to feel secure in their progress.

In sum, our observations find that the use of the blended learning format, if well implemented, can truly enhance the quality of instruction and the learning environment. It challenges the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky’s,1978) and posits students as the source of knowledge, expertise, and experiences in the classroom. Professors interested in this approach should be aware that the motivation must be more than bending to administration desire for more space and efficient use of faculty instruction hours. Use of consistent and high quality lecture materials, well-designed and targeted class activities, and modalities that allow students to self-pace and review as much as needed, is ideal to establish content mastery, skill development and a lower level of anxiety for a variety of students. This has been our finding and it demonstrates exciting possibilities for the use of different teaching modalities in the future.

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