

Journal of the Association for Communication Administration
29(2000), 185-195

Assessing the Perceived Effectiveness of the Basic Communication Course: An Examination of the Mass-Lecture Format Versus the Self-Contained Format

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Effective communication skills are widely recognized as desirable traits by employers and university officials. In 1993, Fisher reported, "Nearly every survey that asks employers to list the areas in which college graduates most need to improve shows communication skills to be at or very near the top of the list" (p. 3). Many higher education institutions now require speech courses as part of their core curricula in an attempt to meet regional accrediting organization mandates (e.g., Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 1992, p. 18) which require that college graduates possess competence in oral communication (Association of American Colleges, 1985).

Given workforce demands and accreditation mandates for these skills, the basic communication course has developed wide appeal across the United States with approximately 85% of all colleges and universities requiring noncommunication majors to enroll in it (Trank, Becker, & Hall, 1986). According to Trank (1990), the basic course typically follows one of three standard approaches: an interpersonal communication course emphasizing a theoretical approach to understanding communication; a public speaking course focusing on "public" presentations (54% according to Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1985); or a hybrid course including both theory and application and addressing broader topics [i.e., public speaking, interpersonal communication, group communication (34% according to Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1985)]. Dependent upon the content and approach, the course is typically taught as a mass lecture, a mass lecture/small laboratory

combination, or a self-contained class (typically enrolling 18-30 students). The national survey cited in Friedrich & Boileau (1990) reported "85% of the instructors teach sections of the course intact rather than in a large-lecture, small-lab format. . ." (p.13).

College enrollment figures in basic communication courses are expected to increase substantially (Sawyer & Behnke, 1997). The U.S. Department of Education projected that fall, 1998 college enrollments in the United States could reach a record high of 14.6 million, 240,000 more students than enrolled in the fall, 1997 semester (Morreale, 1998). Consequently, communication departments face a logistical burden: how to provide quality basic communication course instruction for more students (typically, with no additional faculty and little additional money).

Adler (1983), McConnell and Sosin (1984), and Gleason (1986) predicted that larger courses would be the college departments' response to increased enrollment. Many departments began moving to the large lecture approach a decade ago in an effort to reduce the cost-per-credit-hour of instruction. "As budgets within departments held steady or declined while enrollments rose, the basic course became a logical and necessary target for exploring possible alternative instructional strategies that would save or revert a substantial portion of the departmental budget" (Trank, 1990, p. 411).

FIGURE 1
Cost Comparison For One Semester (480 Students)

4 Mass Lectures	+	24 Lab Sections		24 Self-Contained Sections
÷4 (full-time course load)		÷4		÷4
=1 (assistant professor)		= 6 graduate assistants		= 6 (assistant professors)
x\$35,000 (annual salary)		x\$6,000		x\$35,000
=\$35,000		=\$36,000		=\$210,000
÷2		÷2		÷2
=\$17,500 (semester salary)		=\$18,000		=\$105,000
TOTAL SALARY COST:				
\$17,500 + \$18,000 = \$35,500				\$105,000

Other strategies have been implemented in an attempt to solve financial and logistical problems (e.g., personalized systems of instruction, computer-assisted instruction, videotapes, undergraduate teaching assistants, team teaching), but none are as widely used as the large course (Pearson, 1990). Smith, Kopfman, and Ahyun (1996), however, identify specific problems associated with large classes:

First, students report increased feelings of estrangement, anonymity, impersonality, and a lack of involvement. . . . The second problem. . . is that students feel the lack of individual attention keenly. . . . The third problem. . . is the inhibition of student to instructor communication These negative factors. . . often lead to negative outcomes in regard to student perceptions of the instructor and the course and student learning.

Students who experience the negative factors associated with large classes tend to have lower perceptions of instructor and course quality (Gibbs & Jenkins, 1992). . . . These negative outcomes are more likely to affect lower-division students. . . (pp. 220-221).

In this study, the first two problems associated with the large course (collectively, student feelings of estrangement, anonymity, impersonality, lack of involvement, and lack of individual attention) are collapsed into two, connected bodies of instructional communication research: motivation and immediacy. And, the culmination of these problem areas, lowered perceptions of instructor and course quality, is explored in terms of teacher credibility. A brief discussion of each of these areas, (motivation, immediacy, and credibility), and associated research questions are presented in the following sections.

Motivation and Immediacy

Richmond (1990) suggested that the critical link between teachers' communication behaviors and student learning may be the impact of those behaviors on student motivation. She concluded that the primary role of communication in the classroom is not just the means of sending content and control messages, but may be the primary means by which motivation can be increased and learning enhanced. Christophel (1990) concurs, "teachers can be active agents within the educational environment, capable of stimulating the development of student motivation toward learning" (p. 324).

Current thinking identifies two types of motivation: trait and state. Whereas trait motivation is pervasive (like a personality trait), state motivation is context- or situation-specific, and can vary from time to time (Frymier & Shulman, 1995). In the educational context, an individual may have trait motivation in terms of being generally motivated to attend class, study, learn, and earn average grades. This same individual, however, may earn an "A" in an interpersonal communication class because he or she perceives the instructor as engaging and the class activities as relevant and fun. In this case, state motivation factors influenced the student's classroom performance. Frymier and Shulman emphasize the distinction between state and trait motivation, indicating, as illustrated above, that teachers can impact students' state motivation, and hence, learning.

Recent discussion ties state and trait student motivation to antecedent conditions (factors students bring to the class with them), course design, student success, and teacher behavior. In their on-going studies, Gorham and Millette (1997) compared teachers' perceptions of student motivation and students' perceptions of student motivation. Interestingly, they discovered discrepancies. Students reported being more motivated by antecedent conditions, and being more demotivated by teacher behaviors related to communication and course structure. Specifically, students attributed demotivation to apparent state factors: poor instructional presentation skills, lack of teacher enthusiasm, and course content and organization. Gorham and Millette (1997) said that teachers held similar perceptions of their students' motivation, however, . . . "The sharp division between motivation as a personally-owned state and demotivation as a teacher-owned problem reported by students was not apparent in teachers' perceptions" (p. 257).

The relationship between student motivation and teacher immediacy has been explored by instructional communication researchers. Immediacy, conceptualized by Mehrabian (1971) as communication behaviors which enhance physical and psychological closeness with another, is operationalized in this study as teacher verbal and nonverbal behaviors which increase or decrease the degree of psychological distance between teacher and students (Andersen, 1979; Gorham, 1988). Behaviors classified as verbally immediate include use of personal examples, using "we" and "our", using students' first names, and using humor (Frymier, 1993). Behaviors classified as nonverbally immediate include

eye contact, smiling, positive use of gestures, vocal variety, forward body leans, and a relaxed body position. Rodriguez, Plax, and Kearney (1996) stated, "Nonverbally immediate teachers *cause* students to acquire or increase positive attitudes toward the subject and/or teacher and in turn, this affective learning *causes* students to learn cognitively" (p. 296). Verbal and nonverbal immediacy have been connected to student affective learning, behavioral learning, perceived cognitive learning, motivation, and empowerment; and perceptions of teacher clarity, humor, socio-communicative style, and effectiveness (see Freitas, Meyers, & Avtgis, 1998).

The physical nature of the large lecture hall may affect the students' ability to perceive (select, organize, and interpret) teacher immediacy behaviors. The size of the room and the configuration of the chairs/desks are likely to limit teacher and student movement in the classroom. Limited movement suggests that only those students in close proximity to the teacher would be able to actually recognize verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors, both of which have repeatedly been found to have a positive impact on students' motivation (Christophel, 1990; Richmond, 1990) and affective and cognitive learning (Rodriquez, Plax & Kearney, 1996). If students can't see the instructor's eyes or facial expression, or hear the subtle vocal inflections, then they won't be able to acknowledge those behaviors as immediate and respond accordingly. Therefore, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the instructional format (mass-lecture/lab vs. self-contained) of a basic communication course have an impact on student motivation?

RQ2: Does the instructional format (mass-lecture/lab vs. self-contained) of a basic communication courses have an impact on student perceptions of teacher verbal immediacy?

RQ3: Does the instructional format (mass-lecture/lab vs. self-contained) of a basic communication course have an impact on student perceptions of teacher nonverbal immediacy?

Teacher Credibility

Originally articulated by Aristotle as *ethos*, the credibility construct had three dimensions: intelligence, character, and good will (Cooper, 1932). McCroskey and Young (1981) re-examined the construct and defined it as two-dimensional, consisting of competence (or authoritativeness) and character (how much a person is liked, respected, and admired), and argued that both dimensions remained reasonably stable across public figures, teachers, and other sources. Beatty and Behnke (1980) found that consistent verbal and nonverbal teacher messages led to perceptions of greater character, but not necessarily greater competence. Positive vocal cues appeared to be more predictive of competence. Frymier and Thompson (1992) found that several affinity-seeking strategies were positively and significantly associated with both dimensions of credibility. They also reported that perceptions of teacher credibility and teachers' use of affinity-seeking strategies were positively and significantly associated with students' motivation to study. They claim that the more affinity-seeking strategies teachers are perceived as using, the more credibility they are perceived as having. Furthermore, when perceptions of affinity-seeking strategies and credibility escalate, so do student reports of increased motivation. Research suggests that increasing teacher credibility has a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Andersen, 1972, 1973; Beatty & Zahn, 1990; Dempsey, 1975; Wheelless, 1974a, 1974b, 1975). Numerous studies established the importance of source credibility in the learning process

(Andersen, 1973; Dempsey, 1975; Wheelless, 1971, 1974a, 1974b, 1975). Specifically, research suggests that increasing teacher credibility has a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Andersen, 1972, 1973; Beatty & Zahn, 1990; Dempsey, 1975; Wheelless, 1974a, 1974b, 1975). Thweatt and McCroskey (1996) conclude that

. . . teachers who are perceived to be more credible will produce more positive affect toward themselves and/or the content of the class and increase the likelihood a student will take another class in the same content area and/or with that teacher. . . students cognitive learning is related to their perceptions of their teachers' credibility—the higher the credibility, the higher the learning. (p. 349)

Because of the connections established between perceptions of teacher credibility and student learning, we proposed the following research question:

RQ4: Does the instructional format (mass-lecture/lab vs. self-contained) of a basic communication course have an impact on student perceptions of teacher credibility?

METHOD

Respondents

Respondents in this study were 925 undergraduate college students enrolled in multi-section basic communication courses at a comprehensive, mid-western university during the spring 1997, fall 1997, and spring 1998 semesters. Demographic data appear in Table 1. Respondents completed survey instruments in class near the end of the semester. Student responses were voluntary, anonymous, and uncompensated.

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Basic Course Sample

Characteristic	Mass Lecture (n=658)	Self-Contained (n=267)
Classification		
Freshman	231 (35.1%)	65 (24.3%)
Sophomore	254 (38.6%)	71 (26.6%)
Junior	92 (13.9%)	54 (20.2%)
Senior	74 (11.2%)	70 (26.2%)
Irregular	6 (1.0%)	7 (2.6%)
Gender		
Male	312 (47.4%)	115 (43.1%)
Female	343 (52.1%)	151 (56.6%)
Age		
Under 20	296 (44.9%)	87 (32.6%)
20-21	253 (38.4%)	95 (35.6%)
22-23	64 (9.7%)	41 (15.4%)
24-25	20 (3.0%)	12 (4.5%)
25+	24 (3.6%)	32 (11.9%)

Ethnicity			
Caucasian	573	(87.1%)	228 (85.4%)
African American	50	(7.6%)	20 (7.5%)
Other	30	(4.6%)	17 (6.4%)
Required?			
Yes	421	(63.9%)	163 (61.0%)
No	147	(22.3%)	88 (32.9%)
Unsure	89	(13.5%)	15 (5.6%)

Measurement

Respondents were asked to describe their experience in the basic communication course using a 100 item questionnaire that combined demographic questions with existing survey instruments. These instruments (described below) examined perceptions of teacher verbal immediacy, teacher nonverbal immediacy, student motivation, and teacher credibility.

Verbal Immediacy

The Verbal Immediacy Behaviors instrument (Gorham, 1988) was a 17-item, Likert-type scale with response options ranging from *never engage in that behavior (1)* to *very often (5)*. The scale has been widely used and reports reliability scores ranging from .83 to .94 (Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990; Powell & Harville, 1990). Cronbach's alpha for the present study was .91.

Nonverbal Immediacy

The Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors (NIB) Scale, consistent with Mehrabian's (1967, 1981) conceptualization of the construct, was a 14-item, Likert-type scale with responses ranging from *never (1)* to *very often (5)*. The NIB asks students to report their perceptions of the frequency of their teacher's nonverbally immediate behaviors. This instrument constructed by Richmond, Gorham, and McCroskey (1987) was based on an earlier 15-item scale developed by Andersen (1979). Reliability estimates range from .73 to .89 (Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Zakahi, 1990; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987) with the lower scores reflecting data obtained from teacher self-reports and higher estimates reflecting data from student reports of their teacher's immediacy behaviors. Cronbach's alpha for the present study was .90.

Student Motivation

The Student Motivation Scale was a collection of 16 semantic differential items used in various combinations by different researchers. Students were asked to circle the number toward either word which best represented their feelings. Choices range from 1 to 7. Beatty and Payne (1985) reported alpha coefficients of .93 and .96 for two different administrations of their four item version. Beatty, Forst, and Stewart (1986) obtained an alpha coefficient of .79 for their three item survey. Richmond (1990) identified an alpha coefficient of .94 for her five item questionnaire. Christophel (1990) reported alpha coefficients ranging from .95 to .96 for her 12-item instrument. Cronbach's alpha for the present study using all 16 questions was .76.

Teacher Credibility

Based on items from McCroskey and Young's (1981) research, a six-item semantic differential scale was developed to assess student's perceptions of teacher credibility. Students evaluated instructors in terms of specific bipolar adjectives on a 7-point scale. Reliability estimates for McCroskey and Young's instrument range from .84 to .93 (Beatty & Behnke, 1980; Beatty & Zahn, 1990; McCroskey, 1966; McCroskey & Young, 1981; and, Powers, Nitcavic & Koerner, 1990). For the current study, the six-item measure of teacher credibility had a Cronbach's alpha of .90.

RESULTS

The main analysis focused on the differences in the variables between the two instructional format groups (mass-lecture/lab sections of public speaking and interpersonal communication versus self-contained sections of public speaking and interpersonal communication). To analyze the data, one way ANOVAs were conducted with statistical significance being reported at the $p < .05$ level.

Study sample demographic characteristics on student classification, gender, age, ethnicity, and course requirement were obtained. Frequencies and percentages of these characteristics are presented in Table 1.

The first research question examined the impact the instructional format of the basic communication course had on student motivation. Results indicated no significant differences among groups ($F[3, 913]=1.78$; $p=.15$).

The second research question explored the impact the instructional format of the basic communication course had on student perceptions of their instructor's verbal immediacy (see Table 2). The data indicated students in self-contained sections of the basic communication course perceived their instructors as being more verbally immediate than did students in mass-lecture/lab sections ($F[3, 912]=37.31$; $p < .001$).

TABLE 2
Analysis of Variance on Perceived Verbal Immediacy Response by Course

Source	df	SS	MS	F Ratio
Between groups	3	17257.9672	5752.6557	37.3053*
Within groups	912	140634.8232	154.2049	
Total	915	157892.7904		

* $p < .001$

The third research question examined the impact the instructional format of the basic communication course had on student perceptions of teacher nonverbal immediacy. Results indicated no significant differences among groups ($F[3, 912]=.96$; $p=.41$).

The final research question asked if student perceptions of teacher credibility differed between instructional formats of the course. Initially, results indicated apparent significant differences between groups ($F[3, 917]=2.80$; $p < .05$). However, the post-hoc Tukey test indicated that no statistically significant differences existed between the course formats.

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to determine the most effective and efficient instructional format for basic communication courses. The results of the analysis lend support to the use of the mass-lecture/laboratory format. Although Erikson and Strommer (1991) indicated that feelings of anonymity, common in the large lecture class, diminished motivation, commitment, and personal responsibility of the students, we did not find similar results. Students indicated, across both instructional formats, comparable perceptions of student motivation, teacher nonverbal immediacy, and teacher credibility. It appears that the mass-lecture/laboratory format was perceived by students as being as effective as self-contained sections of basic courses.

Students in self-contained sections of the basic communication course did identify their instructors as being more verbally immediate. Instructors may feel more inclined to use behaviors associated with verbal immediacy (use of collective pronouns "we" and "our," students' first names, humor, and personal examples) due to the esprit de corps or class identity that typically develops in smaller, self-contained sections. Additionally, students may perceive more verbal immediate behaviors extended to them by their instructors because of the smaller class size. Logistically, it's much easier to learn and use the names of students in a class of 30 compared to a class of 130, both from an instructor's perspective as well as a student's perspective. Finally, smaller groups of students may simply facilitate a more comfortable, "interpersonal" dynamic which would engender the use of teacher humor and personal stories.

Initially, a statistically significant difference was found between mass-lecture/lab and self-contained formats concerning perceptions of teacher credibility. However, the post-hoc test did not detect where those differences existed. While further examination in this area is warranted, the post-hoc test provides some assurance that teacher credibility is not significantly affected by the mass-lecture/lab instructional format.

Current findings suggest the necessity of additional research and minor methodological changes. First, more comparable sample sizes for the mass-lecture/laboratory and self-contained sections should be used. This study had more than twice the number of students enrolled in the mass-lecture/lab sections. Additionally, pure mass-lectures could be added to the comparison of instructional formats. It is plausible that the students in the mass-lecture/lab were positively influenced by their experiences in the smaller lab section. The laboratory instructors and nature of the lab sessions could have minimized, even negated, the problems associated with large classes (Smith, Kopfman, & Ahyun, 1996). Not only should comparable numbers of students in the different instructional formats be used, but also future research should extend to other disciplines and their introductory level courses to enhance generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, some scale modifications are warranted. The poor reliability ($\alpha = .76$) for the 16-item student motivation instrument makes findings from that comparison suspect. A 12-item version of the scale by Christophel (1990), reporting higher reliability (.95 and .96), could be used in future studies. The general length of the survey (100 items) and when it was administered may also need to be modified. A 100-item instrument could have led respondents to ignore some of the questions or to rush through the process. Additionally, surveys were administered at the end of a class period. The length and timing issues may have caused some data contamination.

Finally, cognitive learning should be included in future studies. Perceptions of student motivation, teacher immediacy, and teacher credibility are variables clearly linked to learning outcomes, but specific, cognitive measures, including pre- and post-assessments, should be incorporated. Although students may perceive the two instructional formats as comparable, if they actually learn better/more in the smaller class setting, then the mass-

lecture/small lab format may be cost-efficient, but not truly effective. If it is discovered that students do have similar learning outcomes, then the mass-lecture/small laboratory instructional format may receive widespread implementation as a viable solution to the demands of the workforce, accrediting agencies, rising enrollment, and budgetary constraints. Overall, this study provides some assurance to administrators that the cost savings realized in mass-lecture/laboratory formats of the basic communication courses is not obtained at the expense of quality.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

The authors would like to thank Murray State University's Committee on Institutional Studies and Research (CISR) for the monetary funding that made this study possible. Additionally, the authors extend special thanks to Janet Hester, a graduate research assistant in the Department of Speech Communication and Theatre, for her contributions to this paper.

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