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CO-OPERATIVE STAFF-STUDENT RESEARCH IN PUBLIC SPEAKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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A Problem Identified

When I was a second-year undergraduate psychology student, it became clear to me during my degree that I excelled at presentations while many of my peers struggled. I observed that many of them would actively have to ask for changes to their assessment types from presentation to written, or one-on-one presentations. Watching others speak created a level of discomfort for me as they shook, stuttered, blanked out, or stared at the ground. I realized there was a lack of support services that were offered by the university. It was apparent that there was minimal support and assistance at the university for students who currently suffer from public speaking anxiety. Individuals whom suffer from public speaking anxiety are seen have less interpersonal, academic and vocational successes in life (Blume, Baldwin, & Ryan, 2013). Knowing little support was available to enhance public speaking, I wanted to help my classmates. In my role at the time as a supplemental instruction leader (peer-assisted study leader), I was facilitating group discussions for 40-50 students per week. I believed this was a good outlet and opportunity for me to support other students with this significant issue while also gaining valuable experience in assisting others. However, I knew that I didn't have the relevant skill set required to assist students that have significant anxieties around public speaking. At the time, I was studying an Abnormal Psychology unit and learning about diagnostic methods for the spectrums of mental health disorders. I found the lecturer to be engaging—always using interesting ways of describing problems and incorporating music to capture the attention of students and create a 'live' atmosphere.

Partners in Problem Solving

So I decided to approach the lecturer of that course to discuss my observations related to student anxiety with public speaking and ask for advice on how I could assist other students. Approaching the door to the lecturer's office was a confronting experience for me. As a second-year student approaching a clinical psychologist, I knew how large a workload academic staff have and how many students ask them for their advice and supervision every day. After the initial 'hellos' there was an awkward silence. I explained that many students seemed to fear public speaking (which, ironically, was a feeling I could empathize with at that exact moment). I managed to articulate the situation, my position as a peer leader, the amount of students that I see weekly, and what their issues were. Then the lecturer asked, 'What's your plan of action for the issue that you have recognized?' I believed that utilizing the friendly, open, and non-judgmental peer learning environment to support other students in this area would allow for only a minimal level of apprehension as a starting point to assist them.

The lecturer, to my surprise, agreed completely that the anxiety that students display when publicly speaking was a real issue. She also expressed that there was minimal time, resources, and opportunities for students to practice public speaking or to learn about reducing their anxiety.

She indicated that the issue was increasing. The lecturer then asked me what I believed that ‘we’ could do about this matter. I explained that the research suggested that graded exposure techniques and skills building would potentially assist the students to reach a comfortable level with their ability to speak in front of others (Bodie, 2010; Duff, Levine, Beatty, Woolbright, & Sun Park, 2007). However, I expressed my uncertainty with my ability to administer such techniques. Suddenly there was a ‘ding’ from the computer and the lecturer explained that she has another meeting and she would be happy to ‘supervise this project’ as she believed that this course of action would be beneficial to students.

Leaving the room I was shocked as I had no idea that I was asking for a supervisor and that I would have a clinical psychologist that would be happy to assist me in working on and developing a peer-led, scaffolded skills building program to assist students. I was under the impression that my lecturers were always busy and did not have time. Nor did I know that this one brave but simple conversation would be the beginning of a long research and mentoring student-staff relationship.

Going back to my peer leader supervisor there was a huge grin on my face because I was thinking this was an incredible opportunity to create student-staff collaboration that could assist students experiencing anxiety related to public speaking. A week later the lecturer, my peer leader supervisor, and I caught up for a subsequent session to map out how we would progress. This time, the lecturer had resources printed out and explained that she created a framework surrounding a graded exposure methodology and used a well-known theory to build a scaffold approach to identify and address the problem. She also suggested that we should submit an Independent Study Contract (I.S.C.) so that I could have my work recognized and count towards my degree. This was unexpected and a privilege especially as I had no idea what an I.S.C. was. She explained it as a unit in which students can enroll with a supervisor that allows you to do other work surrounding your degree that is not an already scheduled unit. Both my supervisors in psychology and peer learning were adamant that I should do the I.S.C. For me, it was an opportunity to work with two people that I admired.

The partnership formed between me and my two supervisors centered on the combined vision of assisting students that were struggling with issues to do with public speaking. Working with this in mind we were able to work as partners to strive for the greater good. The core values surrounding this project were that it was student led, allowing me to make my own decisions on where to go next and the supervisors were in a mentorship role.

Tentative Conclusions

At the time, I could not have foreseen what the partnership would amount to but two years later I can report numerous outcomes:

- three presentations at national conferences
- two journal articles
- a national review of support available
- a focused attention program for peer leaders to use with their peers
- a continual development program surrounding mindful academic coaching

I now have more experience in research than most of my peers. This is due to my decision to start a discussion about my observations and a desire to want to assist other students. It would not have happened without the willingness of two academics to work with a second-year undergraduate student who had an idea to use peer-learning methodology to assist other students with public speaking. I cannot thank my supervisors enough for their support and encouragement of our research project. I have grown both professionally and personally from this experience. Without this experience, I would not have believed it possible that a student could make a change to so many other students particularly in an area traditionally perceived to be postgraduate research. The experience of identifying the problem of student anxiety related to public speaking, working with colleagues to address this, and providing student support has allowed me to build and apply a set of skills over the past two years. I believe this will allow for a smooth transition from undergraduate to post graduate studies.

The importance of being able to speak with confidence and conviction should not be underestimated. The impact of our work to support students, and enable clear and confident communication at our university is clear: the program is being rolled out across our peer learning programs with great success. I am glad I took those first steps and approached my psychology lecturer. I hope by sharing this reflection I can encourage other students to take initiative in building their own skill sets.

References

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