Speech Anxiety in the Communication Classroom During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Supporting Student Success

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A wealth of literature clearly supports the presence of speech anxiety in the communication classroom, especially in those classes with a focus on public speaking and/or presentations. Over the years, much work has been done on intentional approaches to empowering students to effectively manage their speech anxiety in face-to-face, hybrid, and online communication courses. These research-based findings have led to best practices and strong pedagogical approaches that create a supportive classroom culture and foster engaged learning. Then COVID-19 appeared, and things changed. In an effort to keep campuses safe and save the spring semester, everyone jumped online. Many instructors and students were experiencing online education for the first time and, understandably, anxiety exploded. Between the uncertainty of a global pandemic, the unchartered territory of a midterm pivot to fully online education, and the unknown effects of the situation on our educational system, our stress levels grew. Public speaking and presentations took on new meaning with Zoom sessions and webcams and our speech anxiety, undoubtedly, grew, as well. Reflecting upon the scholarship of the past with an appreciation of our present situation and looking toward the future, we will curate a list of best practices to prepare students to effectively manage their speech anxiety with agency, ability, and confidence.

Keywords: speech anxiety, public speaking anxiety, instructional communication, communication pedagogy, Best Practices

INTRODUCTION

It is impossible for Isabella to catch her breath. Her pulse is racing, she is flushed, and her thoughts are a jumbled mess. She is desperately trying to remember her plan, slow her breathing and visualize success but it is impossible to do anything but panic. She is convinced she will embarrass herself and fail her assignment. Why had she postponed taking her public speaking class? Yes, it would have been bad in a "normal" term but now, amidst the coronavirus pandemic, she had to take the class online. Though it seems unimaginable that the class could be more terrifying, add Zoom sessions, internet connection issues, and little engagement with her teacher or classmate and Isabella's out of control speech anxiety is completely understandable. If you have been in a college classroom, most likely, you have had to deliver a presentation, lead a discussion, or share a poster presentation. If so, you know what speech anxiety is like. Most of us have experienced the racing heart rate, difficulty concentrating and sensory overload characteristic of speech anxiety (Dwyer, 2012). For some of us, like Isabella, the

speech anxiety is almost debilitating. Even if you are one of the rare people who does not experience speech anxiety, you probably witnessed your classmates struggle with the stress, worry and insecurity caused by speech anxiety. It was prevalent before the arrival of COVID-19 and now with the stressors associated with the pandemic, virtual learning, and social distancing it will most likely increase. Fortunately, we have the research, resources, and resolve to intentionally craft classroom culture that will support communication success.

Meeting the Challenges of COVID-19

In the early spring of 2020, the coronavirus pandemic arrived in the United States, and required an unprecedented mid-term pivot. Classes rapidly moved from face-to-face instruction to online platforms in days. Teachers who had never taught online were learning while teaching, managing that additional workload while trying to stay connected with students who were worried and often overwhelmed. In addition to the public and personal health concerns of the virus, there were worries about online learning, the economy, and mental health. The bright spot was that in so many classes, the connections had been established before the pivot and so teachers and students were able to engage with familiar people in new ways. It was not an ideal situation but there was a sense that we were all in this together.

The fall of 2020 found many institutions of higher education and their faculty, staff, and students once again engaged in online instruction and it looks like it will be that way for the near future. We were faced with the new challenge of creating supportive and engaging class spaces completely virtual (in many cases) or in hybrid form with some classes combining online coursework with limited in-person instruction. Experience taught us that our students were speech anxious and that we needed to intentionally design safe and engaging spaces to support their success even before the arrival of COVID-19. Our challenge was to adopt a new skillset and look to the online learning community for resources, suggestions, and best practices.

Pandemic Pedagogy

Articles and emerging research on the response to the pandemic at the institutional, classroom, and individual level provide a glimpse into how we can craft virtual classroom spaces that support learning while meeting the needs created by COVID-19. Common themes for solid pandemic pedagogy include a focus on student mental health and well-being (Gigliotti, 2020; Burke, 2021), an appreciation of technology challenges and access issues (Turner et al., 2020; Burke, 2021; Singh, 2021), and a commitment to engaged teaching and learning (Turner et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2021; Lederman, 2021). The fundamentals of good teaching are the same regardless of the modality and the foundational pedagogical practices are also similar, yet the primary difference is that solid online education has been designed for a virtual modality, not adapted to fit it (Kelly and Westerman, 2016). How can we craft safe and supportive online and virtual spaces for students to find, develop, and then actively share? A good place to start is with wayfinding which can "reinforce ways of knowing and problem solving," (Petroski and Rogers, 2020, p. 125). Wayfinding supports efficacy and

empowerment while meeting the challenges of pandemic pedagogy and can be incorporated into online communication classes to reduce speech anxiety and build classroom culture.

Speech Anxiety

The fear of public speaking, known as glossophobia, is a common and real form of anxiety (Sawchuk, 2017) affecting as much as 75% of the population (Black, 2019). In the scholarly literature, it is usually referred to as communication anxiety, communication apprehension, or communication avoidance (Richmond and McCroskey, 1998). In more popular sources, such as Harvard Management Communication Letter, it has been called stage fright (Daly and Engleberg, 1999) and speech anxiety (Getting over speech anxiety, 2001). In this work, we will refer to it as *speech anxiety* as that term most closely targets the experience we are exploring.

Regardless of the label, it is our innate survival mode of flight, fight, or flee in the face of imminent (real or perceived) danger (Thomas, 1997; Dwyer, 1998). Our mind feels a threat from a public speaking situation and our body responds accordingly. Common symptoms can include increased heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing; excessive perspiration, skin flush or blush; shaky voice; trembling hands and feet; or dry mouth and nausea (Thomas, 1997; Dwyer, 1998; Black, 2019).

There are many tips and techniques that can help those with speech anxiety manage their symptoms and communicate effectively across a variety of modalities. Some common strategies include relaxation, visualization, cognitive restructuring, and skills training (Motley, 1997; Thomas, 1997; Richmond and McCroskey, 1998; Dwyer, 2012).

(1) Typical relaxation tips can include mindfulness, deep breathing, yoga, listening to music, and taking long walks,

(2) Visualization involves inviting the speaker to imagine positive outcomes like connecting with their audience, making an impact, and sharing their presentation effectively (Thomas, 1997; Dwyer, 1998). It replaces much of the negative self-talk that tends to occur before a speech opportunity and increases our anxiety.

(3) Cognitive restructuring is a more advanced technique with the goal "to help you modify or change your thinking in order to change your nervous feelings," (Dwyer, 2012, p. 93). In essence, it involves replacing negative expectations and anxious feelings about public speaking opportunities with more positive and self-affirming statements and outlooks.

(4) Skills training is what we do in our classrooms and during professional workshops and trainings. It can include exploring speech anxiety and discussing how common it is as well as ways to effectively manage it (Dwyer, 2012). It also involves analysis of the component parts, such as delivery and content (Motley, 1997) practicing and delivering speeches in low stakes assignments, collaborating with classmates, and engaging in active listening (Simonds and Cooper, 2011).

Ideally, solid skills training introduces the other techniques and encourages individuals to experiment and discover what

works best for them. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to speech anxiety.

Classroom Culture

According to the Point to Point Education website, "Classroom culture involves creating an environment where students feel safe and free to be involved. It's a space where everyone should feel accepted and included in everything. Students should be comfortable with sharing how they feel, and teachers should be willing to take it in to help improve learning," (Point to Point Education, 2018, paragraph 2). Regardless of subject matter, class size, format, or modality, all college classes need a supportive and engaging climate to succeed (Simonds and Cooper, 2011). Yet having a classroom culture that is supportive and conducive to lowering anxiety is especially critical in public speaking courses (Stewart and Tassie, 2011; Hunter et al., 2014). Faculty are expected to engage and connect with students and do so in intentional, innovative, and impactful ways. These can be simple practices, like getting to know students quickly and referring to them by their preferred name, such as a middle name or shortened first name (Dannels, 2015), or more elaborate practices like incorporating active learning activities and GIFTS (Great Ideas for Teaching Students) throughout the curriculum (Seiter et al., 2018). We want to create a positive and empowering classroom climate that offers equitable opportunities for all students to succeed. As educators, we can infuse empathy, spontaneity, and equality into our pedagogy while being mindful of different learning styles and committed to supporting diversity and inclusion (Simonds and Cooper, 2011; Dannels, 2015). Furthermore, our communication classrooms need to be intentional spaces where challenges, such as anxiety disorders, mental health issues, learning disabilities and processing issues, are supported and accommodated (Simonds and Hooker, 2018).

DISCUSSION

Ideally, we want to cultivate a classroom culture of inquiry, success, and connection. We also want to foster immediacy, the "verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that enhance physical and psychological closeness," (Simonds and Cooper, 2011, p. 32). Multiple studies support that teachers who demonstrate immediate behaviors are regarded as more positive, receptive to students, and friendly (Simonds and Cooper, 2011). As teachers and scholars, we want to make a positive impact. Dannels (2015) writes that "teaching is heart work," (p. 197) and she is right. It demands an investment of our authentic selves to craft a climate of safety and support where comfort zones are expanded, challenges are met, and goals are reached.

Educators need to be mindful of and responsive to the challenges COVID-19 presents to the health and well-being of our students, colleagues, and communities. In May of 2020, the National Communication Association (NCA) devoted an entire issue of its magazine to "Communication and Mental Health on campus 2020," (Communication and mental health on campus, 2020) highlighting the importance of this issue in our communication education spaces. Suggestions included learning more about mental health issues, engaging in thoughtful conversations, listening intentionally and actively, promoting well-being, and serving as an advocate and ally (Communication and mental health on campus, 2020).

Scholarship about instructional communication, computer mediated communication and online education (Kelly and Fall, 2011) offers valuable insights into effective practices and adaptations as we intentionally craft engaging and supportive spaces, so our students feel empowered to use their voice and share their story, even those with high speech anxiety. Instructional communication scholars focus on the effective communication skills and strategies that promote and support student success and an engaged learning environment (Simonds and Cooper, 2011).

General strategies to teach effectively during the pandemic can be helpful and easily adaptable to our public speaking classrooms. Being flexible with assignments, deadlines and attendance can support student success and well-being as can creativity, engagement activities, and appealing to different learning styles and strengths (Mahmood, 2020; Singh, 2021). It seems everyone is presenting virtually now, not just in our communication classrooms and that can take some getting used to. Educators can model and promote effective communication by being conversational and engaging and empathizing with the many challenges everyone is facing (Gersham, 2020; Gigliotti, 2020; Jenkins, 2021; Singh, 2021).

This is also a great opportunity to innovate and cultivate a new classroom climate looking at communication in a new way for a new, digital age. During this time of change we can harness opportunities and encourage our students to develop the skillsets needed to communicate effectively during COVID-19 and after. Preparing them as digital communicators with a focus on transferable and applicable skills would help them in other classes and the job market (Ward, 2016). Innovations to our courses, assessment tools, and learning outcomes can all happen now, too (Ward, 2016). This is the time to innovate our course experiences across all modalities, reinvent what public speaking means in the modern, digital age and intentionally craft learning spaces for all students in which speech anxiety is intentionally addressed and effectively managed.

Best Practices

(1) Be flexible, as a matter of practice not exception. Speech anxiety was experienced by most students to some degree and was debilitating for some pre-pandemic and adds another layer of stress for students who are capable and resilient yet dealing with a lot. Podcasts are a common communication medium and may ease the anxiety of some students while highlighting the importance of word choice, rate, and tone. They also involve less bandwidth and technology and may be easier for many students to create.

(2) Reframe communication as a skill of the many, not just the few. Highly speech anxious students tend to believe they are the only ones who have a fear of presenting and only certain, confident individuals can present well. Neither of these are true. If we reframe presentations as conversations, demystify speech anxiety by discussing how common it is, and empower our students with the knowledge that they can effectively communicate, we can reduce anxiety, build confidence, and develop important skills that transcend disciplines and promote self-efficacy.

(3) Build a community of support and success. When we see our students as individuals, celebrate connection

and collaboration, and actively engage to learn and grow, we co-create an impactful and empowering space that supports success not by being rigid and demanding but by being innovative, intentional, and inspiring.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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