

Student Perception of the Showcase Assignment: Treating Public Speaking Anxiety Through the Use of Self-disclosure

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Abstract

This study focuses on a new classroom assignment known as the Showcase Assignment created by the researcher to reduce public speaking anxiety. This paper focuses on a qualitative study. College students enrolled in public speaking courses identified what about the course gave cause for anxiety and asked them to give their opinions on the assignment upon hearing its description. The findings indicated that students are most afraid of peer/instructor judgment. Students agree that the Showcase Assignment is an excellent example of a creative assignment, will aid in creating a supportive classroom environment, and predict it to be an effective and enjoyable assignment. This study was conducted with the intent of learning information to tailor the assignment to student needs before implementing it in a quantitative experiment study. The preliminary results of this quantitative study are also briefly discussed in this presentation.

Keywords: Public Speaking Anxiety; Self-disclosure; Assignments

Introduction

Think of your greatest fear. Is it spiders? Death? Heights? I am personally terrified of heights to the point that thinking too much about heights makes my chest tighten with anxiety. This is how the majority of students feel every day in their public speaking classrooms. This paper discusses Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) as it relates to students in public speaking courses and will present a new classroom assignment created the researcher to help reduce student PSA in a one-time treatment. This presentation focuses mainly on a qualitative study used to gain a better understanding on the challenges facing public speaking students and their opinions of the new classroom assignment before it is implemented. I also briefly discussed the quantitative study that focuses more on the effectiveness of the assignment itself, and how these results can be applied across disciplines.

Brief Review of the Literature

Public Speaking Anxiety (PSA) is a type of communication anxiety where students experience physiological arousal or negative self-doubts and/or negative behavior as a response to an anticipated or actual presentation (Daly, McCroskey, Ayres, Hopf, & Ayres, 1997). Unfortunately, PSA often creates a vicious cycle with high levels of PSA resulting in poor speech preparation and performance that in turn increase the student's PSA levels (Daly, Vangelisti, & Weber, 1995). When students were reporting their most common fears, public speaking was selected more often as a common fear than any other fear, including death (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012).

Learning to cope with public speaking anxiety is essential as presentations are a necessary part of both college and work responsibilities. It is vital that students gain competence in public speaking early to ensure success in academia and the workforce (Johnson & Szczupakiewicz,

1987). It is for these reasons and more that public speaking is often considered a mandatory or core course by many higher education institutions (Emanuel, 2005). The role of a public speaking course is to provide hands on guidance teaching students how to prepare for a presentation, communicate effectively, and alleviate public speaking anxiety (Ford & Wolvin, 1993; Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1985).

The issue that most speech courses face is the order in which the goals listed above are achieved. In a math course, a student is asked to learn the basics before they can be expected to do more advanced formulas. This same thinking should be applied to public speaking courses. How can we expect students to learn how to outline, give proper citations, make eye contact, have enthusiastic tone, and so on, if all of their thoughts are consumed with their fear? When the student is afraid, that is the only thing on their mind when giving a presentation. Just as I mentioned in the introduction, I am terrified of heights. Therefore, you could tell the proper procedures for a successful and even fun skydiving experience all day long, but I would not be able to process that information because of my fear. This means that overcoming PSA is not only an important objective that communication instructors should cover, it should be the very first objective covered.

The Showcase Assignment

I saw both from previous studies and from personal teaching experiences, that there was a need to address communication apprehension in the speech classroom early, and reviewing the literature confirmed this. I wanted to focus solely on apprehension—not on format or delivery—all while making the assignment as enjoyable for students as possible. As a result, the showcase assignment was created. The Showcase Assignment is a classroom tool I designed to aid in alleviating communication apprehension by using self-disclosure and subjecting students to high levels of communication apprehension early through experiential learning theory. It consists of a one to three minute in-class presentation in which the student can entertain the class in any appropriate way they wish as long as they choose something with personal meaning. The students will give a brief introduction of their talent and provide an explanation to the importance of the talent selected. The talent must have the instructor's approval prior to the presentation being given to ensure it is appropriate and fulfills the self-disclosure need.

The assignment was not graded, to reduce the anxiety associated with it. It was simply deemed a participation activity. In order to increase its effectiveness for lowering situation anxiety, it must be the first oral presentation assigned. Examples of talents include but are not limited to singing, dancing, playing an instrument, reading a poem, or baton twirling. I always have students that claim they do not have a talent, but everyone does, it just may be unconventional. I have had students who are talented at math solve difficult equations, a student once solved a Rubik's Cube in front of the class in seconds, and I have also had a single mother of five describe how she juggles her more difficult days. The goal of this assignment is not a successful performance but a successful effort.

The premise is that by engaging in the Showcase Assignment, students would have the opportunity to understand their level of apprehension and practice overcoming their communication apprehension by giving a presentation before the class, which will have them

self-disclose their personal experiences and opinions in front of others. They would be able to learn what it really feels like to stand in front of the class and speak, if they speak slower or faster than they imagined they would and learn if they have any nervous ticks they need to overcome such as swaying or pausing too often. They can learn all of these things without the fear of a grade since this is for participation points only and the least amount of pressure or judgment possible. This was an opportunity that students would not normally have as typically their first time speaking in front of the class is well into the semester and for a grade. When it comes to learning a presentation based on art form the only way to learn is by physically engaging in the material and in this case through experiential learning theory.

Methodology

Before implementing this new classroom tool for quantitative testing, I wanted to first like to gain a deeper understanding of what specifically causes student PSA and how the Showcase Assignment can be fine-tuned to better fit the needs of the students before it is implemented. Therefore, this qualitative study gathered student opinions on PSA, classroom environment, creative classroom assignments, and the Showcase Assignment through 15 semi-structured interviews. The participants of this study were full-time undergraduate students from a small, two-year, southern community college currently enrolled in a basic public speaking course. Data was obtained through scheduling and conducting face to face structured interviews.

The following research questions were explored:

- (1) What about public speaking courses causes communication anxiety?
- (2) How do students feel about the showcase assignment?
- (3) Is the showcase assignment viewed as a balanced creative learning opportunity by students?
- (4) How does the showcase assignment help build a supportive classroom environment?

I began coding data after the first two interviews to begin the theoretical sampling technique. Theoretical sampling occurs when participants are selected according to criteria specified by the researcher and based on initial findings. For this study the researcher alternated analysis and data collection between every two interviews conducted to determine when saturation was met. This method of coding was chosen so that comparisons could be made without restricting the researchers to interpret participants' words within a framework of properties and dimensions. This is done to add depth and structure to the existing categories. These categories can then be interlinked to build the basis for a theory.

Results

(1) What About Public Speaking Courses Causes Communication Anxiety?

After interviewing 15 students the researcher learned there are three main causes for student anxiety in a speech course: judgement from peers, judgement from the instructor, and drawing a blank. Students discuss the feeling of having everyone's eyes on them, the thought of messing up in front of everyone, and the fear of judgement.

Students not only worry about being judged by their peers, but by the instructor as well, “the biggest fear of all is the teacher. She is used to speeches, she knows what to look for and it is all new to you. It’s not so much eyes on me, but the judging and what the audience and teacher are thinking.”

Finally, some students have the fear of getting in front of the class and completely forgetting what they had planned to say. No matter how well one plans for their first presentation, they never know what it feels like to be in front of that crowd until they are up there. One student described her experience, “the first speech we gave I had it down pat, but then I got up there, and I was like ‘oh wait maybe I don’t have this’ and it was because stage fright got the best of me.”

(2) How Do Students Feel About the Showcase Assignment upon Hearing the Description?

To answer this research question, I asked students their overall opinion of the Showcase Assignment, if they believe it is applicable to all public speaking courses, how their anxiety levels would be toward this assignment, how their anxiety levels would change in their future changes after completing this assignment, and how they feel about the grading process of this assignment.

First, students gave their overall opinion toward the Showcase Assignment. It was very well received by all. All students agreed that it was a good idea that could be used by any speech instructor. One student said, “I think that if they were to start out with something like that it would give a positive boost to the class.”

Secondly, I asked how students would rate their anxiety levels in based on this one assignment. I was expecting students to say they would have high anxiety toward this assignment as it is set around the idea that facing a large amount of apprehension first thing in a public speaking class will reduce anxiety through the life of the class. I wanted to ensure that the assignment was not deemed too high of an anxiety risk by students. Three students reported that they would have very high anxiety toward the assignment, but not so much that they would be unwilling to participate in it.

To the researcher’s surprise most students reported that while a level of anxiety will still be present, the creativity of the assignment and the grading scale for the assignment would make this assignment more enjoyable and less anxiety producing than traditional speech presentations. Students also believe that this assignment will help reduce anxiety because it is a pass or fail assignment.

When looking at this in the quantitative study the results indicated that students in the experiment groups who participated in the Showcase Assignment, confirmed the results above. Students found it to be enjoyable, creative, and a great way to increase supportive classroom environment. While students who in the experiment groups did not self-report lower levels of PSA, they did appear more confident and less anxious than students who did not experience the Showcase Assignment when giving presentations. Student’s in the experiment group also scored higher on speaking assignments than students in the control group.

(3) Is the Showcase Assignment Viewed as a Balanced Creative Learning Opportunity by Students?

When asked why some students enjoy creative based assignments the researcher received one of three basic answers: “I like to reveal personal information about myself,” “I like to practice my creative skills,” or “I like the feeling of control.” By far the answer the researcher received most, from 10 students, was students like the feeling of being in control of the assignment or their grade. When asked why that feeling of control is a comfort to students in a speech class one student responded, “I don’t have to worry about that judgement that I am so afraid of; I cannot be graded on that part.”

(4) How does the Showcase Assignment Help Build a Supportive Classroom Environment?

Students were asked what could be done to create a more supportive speech classroom environment. Students believe that the Showcase Assignment will help build a supportive environment by creating a less formal environment: “I think it definitely would improve the classroom environment. It’s always good to laugh and have a good time, performing a skill or talent would be something fun to show case and make it easier to get to know one another.” Having a more relaxed environment puts students at ease by reducing the pressure for perfection. This was confirmed in the quantitative study as well when students agree that the Showcase Assignment would create a level playing field and reduce student comparison. Students also feel that engaging in greater amounts of self-disclosure activities like the assignment will help them bond with their peers as well as serve as a form of audience analysis for the class. As one student said, “It will work because you will see relatability and varying degrees of passion towards similar topics. I believe it will help with our audience analysis activities that we do in class.”

While the assignment can go a long way in helping build a supportive environment, it can only go so far without the instructor’s guidance. Students suggested ways a speech instructor could enhance a supportive classroom environment and overwhelmingly mentioned the importance of the instructor explaining the no pressure or no judgement aspect of the Showcase Assignment. They mentioned that delivering this assignment in a laid-back and less stressful tone of voice is key to making students feel at ease. This would go a long way to increasing student and instructor bonding at the first of the course. This was also confirmed in the quantitative study. These results lead me to say that handling this assignment in a delicate empathetic manner will lead to success; however, handling this in a stressful or callous way could possibly have the opposite effect.

Discussion

While it is important to conduct quantitative studies on new assignments like this to see if they are effective, I chose to begin with the qualitative approach because if students do not find it enjoyable or worthwhile the assignment is an automatic failure in my opinion. This is especially true learning that students want to feel that they are in control of some aspect of their education and their assignments, as this study pointed out in the creativity section of the findings. Adult education research shows that adults tend to be motivated intrinsically meaning that it is not the grade or gold stars that motivate adult learners the most at the end of the day but rather the internal desire to do well and enjoy the task at hand (Gom, 2009; Kasworm, 1993). When discussing these results at the AHEA conference many instructors mentioned that this

assignment could be transferable across disciplines such as changing the assignment to an essay instead of a speech for an English class. The experiential learning opportunities could be tailored to the course while the objectives and goals of boosting a supportive classroom environment and lowering anxiety still apply. One instructor mentioned that it can take up to six weeks into the semester before her students are comfortable with each other and with her, and we all discussed the negative effects of teaching in a tension filled awkward classroom.

This assignment forces bonding, which can skyrocket classroom bonding from six weeks to as little as three days. During the conference discussion it was agreed that when a supportive classroom environment is established teachers are able to give better lecture performances, class discussions are more impactful, and students feel more comfortable asking questions or making relevant comments. While building assignments and alleviating PSA is not a new idea, the ability to accomplish these goals within the first two weeks of the semester is impressive

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