

Empowering Public Speaking Students Through Consultant Training in Empathetic Listening

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Public speaking centers have the potential to act as places of empowerment for public speaking students as they craft speeches and hone public speaking abilities. Peer consultants in speaking centers are uniquely positioned to serve as sources of empowerment for their peers. Building on current literature around empathetic listening in the center, this essay discusses the role empathetic listening plays in the empowerment of public speaking students and best practices for teaching empathetic listening skills to peer consultants.

Public speaking—the ability to share thoughts, ideas, and opinions with an audience—can be both a powerful and empowering experience for the speaker. Unfortunately, however, for many students public speaking is often associated with feelings of dread rather than feelings of purpose, confidence, and success.

Speaking centers on university campuses have risen to meet this challenge. These public speaking centers often utilize peer tutors—undergraduate students who have taken the university’s public speaking course offerings and are thus best equipped to serve their peers. Given the nature of the peer-to-peer relationship as more relaxed than a student-to-professor relationship, the association between peer tutors and public speaking students is integral to the success of any communication center (Cuny, Wilde, & Stevens, 2006). This relationship is also vital to study given its implications for the empowerment of public speaking students and the lessening of anxiety for those with high communication apprehension.

Speaking centers help build this relationship to fulfill the ultimate goal of speaker empowerment. Cuny et al. posit that empathetic listening can facilitate tutor-student relationships in a more effective way (2006). These researchers denote characteristics of empathetic listening as

“being aware and being in the present moment, acknowledging the other, resisting distractions, noting all of the speaker’s nonverbal and verbal communication, and being empathetic to the speaker’s thoughts and feelings...[it] requires that the listener show both verbally and nonverbally that listening is truly taking place” (Cuny et al., 2006, p. 2). The most well-liked, well-respected, and effective peer tutors, then, are the ones who are able to articulate both verbally and with their body language that they are actively listening.

Why does training in empathetic listening lead to student empowerment? Scholar Kathleen Ellis theorized in a 1995 study that public speaking anxiety was negatively related to self-perceived public speaking competency. That is, the lower a student’s self-perception of their public speaking ability, the higher their level of public speaking anxiety. Peer tutors, however, as students who have themselves taken the course in which they tutor, can help bolster the student’s perception of their own speaking ability and temper their oft-exaggerated notions of other students’ abilities.

For example, Cuny et al. write that “if a speaker thinks you are truly listening and understanding him or her, then you can help to develop better personal

understanding. One way for staff to express this type of understanding is by providing examples from their own speaking experiences, which could include personal struggles” (2006, p. 5). Allowing students—especially those with high communication apprehension—a glimpse inside the process for other students, especially those deemed competent enough to tutor the subject, can remind them that they are not alone in the writing and speaking process.

Empathetic listening is a tool for empowerment because it allows students to feel heard and understood in a way they may not in the typical public speaking classroom. Cuny et al. write, “True listening assumes that the speaker has worth, dignity, and something to offer; as a result, this attitude ultimately helps the speaker develop self-confidence” (2006, p. 6). Peer tutors provide this avenue toward self-confidence through their listening skills, which can be bolstered in numerous ways. Jonathan Millen, for example, argues that delivery outlines can be a model to empower student speakers because they reduce speakers’ feelings that they will forget their speech or topic (2001). Peer tutors, then, should be trained in effective outline creation and delivery so as to provide this service for the students they see in the center. By understanding how to craft a powerful outline, peer tutors are then able to pass on this knowledge to their students who express a fear of “freezing” or otherwise forgetting their speech when it comes time to present.

However, it is only by being able to adequately elucidate this fear that consultants can aid students with their outlines. Any strong speech requires a strong outline, and thus the consultant’s ability to help students who express doubts about their outline—their ability to hear, through empathetic listening, that the outline is the root cause of their anxiety, as is often

the case—can empower students to effectively give their speech.

But how can consultants arrive at this conclusion? Empathetic listening certainly can be taught through articles and lectures, and that is a good introduction to the concept for new and training consultants. However, it should not be the only means of training. While training in empathetic listening can take numerous forms, consultants in the speaking center at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, found that they felt most comfortable with the concept of empathetic listening—and feeling as though they could effectively deploy it—when they practiced with in-class, mock sessions in their practicum course for speaking center training and eventual employment. Teams of students paired up, with one acting as the “consultant” and the other acting as the “student.” Each team then walked through the beginning stages of a consultation, beginning with the initial question of “What can I help you with today?” and crafting an effective session based on the outcome of that question. Students in the class shared after the exercise, taking the class through their mock consultation and noting what their partner did that they found particularly effective in hopes that others could implement it in their own sessions with students.

Wake Forest Speaking Center consultants found that there were generally two responses to their opening question of “What can I help you with today?” Students answered either with a simple “I don’t know,” prompting consultants to take a more proactive approach to the session, or the proverbial unleashing of floodgates as the student runs through every possible problem their speech might have. Both responses require empathetic listening to provide the most effective consultation possible.

However, as effective as empathetic listening may be, the adage that there can be “too much of a good thing” certainly holds true here as well. Consultants must take care not to spend so much time listening—so much time responding with statements such as “I hear that you’re concerned about this particular section of your speech”—that they fail to provide any constructive feedback about that particular section of the speech. At Wake Forest, for example, consultants found that spending the first 5-7 minutes of a 20-minute consultation actively engaging in empathetic listening helped students feel comfortable, before turning to a more active approach of looking through the student’s outline or prepared speech.

To be tasked with empowering peers is neither easy nor to be taken lightly. Peer tutors should actively focus on growing their own skills—not only in public speaking, but also in outline writing and empathetic listening. By building these empathetic, active listening skills, peer tutors can understand students’ individual learning styles, assist them in that way, and create a

campus full of empowered speakers who believe that they are capable and competent.

References

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