

Communication Center Effectiveness: The Impact of Tutoring on Speech Performance

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Abstract

In this study, the researchers explore required public speaking tutoring in communication centers and the effect it has on students' grades, speaking apprehension, and expected speech outcomes. Test and control group participants completed the Situational Communication Apprehension Measure after the completion of their persuasive speeches in a traditional public speaking course. Recorded speeches were also analyzed by the researchers. No significant difference was identified between the test and control group related to either communication apprehension or speech delivery. Students in the test group (those students attending required tutoring) did, however, have statistically higher scores related to organizational outcomes and final speech grades. Future directions of research and limitations are discussed.

Introduction and Rationale

Communication centers have proven to be an integral part of speech training, directly impacting retention rates and student success (Von Till, 2012). King and Atkins-Sayre (2012), however, found that students are not likely to attend tutoring sessions in a communication center without faculty support. Research exploring the effectiveness of communication centers is limited (Turner & Sheckels, 2015). To help gain additional faculty and administrative support, further research is necessary to establish specifically how communication centers help students most. As a gauge for effectiveness, the National Communication Association (NCA) provides eight competencies, or goals, for a competent speaker in the basic communication course (Morreale, Moore, Surges-Tatum, & Webster, 2007). As the accepted standard by the national organization, these

competencies are used by the authors in this study to evaluate students who have attended tutoring and those who have not. Communication apprehension is an area focused on in the basic communication course at the program studied, and stressed in the communication center studied, this will also factor in as part of our gauge for effectiveness.

Literature Review: Research into Tutoring.

As the fundamental reasoning behind implementing tutoring, Bell and Morreale (2015) explained that tutoring can supplement the material that students learn in their classes, enabling them to engage that material on a deeper level at any stage in their learning process. They go on to explain that the foundational material in a class must be grasped and understood before a student can move into more advanced material, and

it is tutoring that helps to solidify the foundational material to aid instructors to move forward into the deeper, and more advanced material. Peck, Chilvers, and Lincoln (2010) found that students viewed the learning they received in tutoring as their preferred method of learning. Bell and Morreale (2015) offer an explanation of why students may choose tutoring as their preferred learning support by saying that tutors give students a chance to learn from someone “who may use different language, examples, or instructional methods than their professor,” and that these differences can help the students get a larger picture of the material and better grasp the concepts (p. xi).

Theoretically, tutoring should correlate to effectiveness. However, in Jones’s (2001) research, the author reviewed writing center literature to extrapolate direct and indirect evidence of effectiveness in tutoring. Jones concluded that the structure of tutoring in writing centers, specifically the process approach taken in tutoring, complicates efforts to quantify direct, concrete effectiveness; however, there is a great deal of indirect evidence that shows writing centers affect both the tutor and the tutee positively by promoting critical thinking skills throughout the writing process.

In the sciences, tutoring’s effectiveness has been examined quantitatively. Báez-Galib, Colón-Cruz, Resto, and Rubin (2005) studied a peer tutoring and mentoring program started for chemistry students. In their research, they found a 29% increase in students’ final grades that took part in the program. They concluded that a social context for learning helps students to increase their learning outcomes for the course. Báez-Galib et al. also found that the program increased the retention rates of the participating students

in the course by decreasing the amount of withdrawals.

Communication Center Tutoring

Benefits to the Tutors and the Program. Communication centers offer many benefits to their institutions, including higher retention rates for students and interpersonal communication training for tutors (who are often graduate or undergraduate students) (Yook, 2012; Ward & Schwartzman, 2009). These benefits are established as the tutor makes connections with the speaker (term used for the tutee in a communication center context). Ward and Schwartzman examined the dynamics of individual communication center consultations. Their analysis found that emotional intelligence, empathy, and interpersonal trust form the foundation of successful tutoring experiences. By exhibiting these factors and connecting with their speakers, tutors are able to help communication centers address many of the factors that impact student retention.

Yook found communication centers directly impact “academic performance, social interaction with students and faculty, mentoring and peer support, and involvement in campus activities” (pp. 4-5). Yook’s research suggested that because of these factors, institutions that had a communication center available to students had significantly higher persistence rates than those that did not have a communication center. By giving students an outlet to gain support and feel more connected with the university and the program, the communication center helps students to therefore feel more connected and supported *by* the university and program. Yook explained that this supportive connection is one of the main factors in persistence and retention and directly impacted by the work that

communication centers do.

Benefits to Tutees. Communication centers' tutoring support can provide an important role in the communication instruction at a university. One-on-one tutoring services can address students' concerns regarding their presentations and work to improve the quality of student work. Von Till (2012) explained the history of the communication center movement by saying that timely feedback was found to be essential for success in a public speaking class, and communication centers address that need by providing more targeted feedback to students during the speech making process, in a more timely manner, than instructors are able to do for all of their students individually. She continues by explaining how technology and training has led to students now being provided with opportunities both for help before their speeches and for review and improvement after their presentations that can enhance and expand on their time in oral communication courses.

A study at the University of Richmond's communication center by Hobgood (2010) found that over the three years of the center's operation, they saw improved commitment by students who attended sessions toward a more "serious pursuit of speaking competence" (p. 339-340). This communication center found that many students who were required to attend tutoring sessions would return voluntarily for further support in the future. Both Von Till and Hobgood suggested that not only do communication centers expand on the instruction and depth of a speaking foundation but also students valued the feedback and instruction they received enough to attend voluntary tutoring sessions, and that overall there was an increase in students pursuing more speaking competence.

Hypotheses

Given previous findings regarding individual tutoring of public speaking, it is reasonable to propose the following hypotheses:

H₁: Required tutoring sessions in a communication center will improve student public speaking outcomes.

H₂: Required tutoring sessions in a communication center will improve students' final speech grades.

Specific Challenges of Communication Center Tutoring. While there are many benefits of tutoring as a whole, there are also some specific challenges that come with communication-specific tutoring. In communication centers, the tutor works with either a single student or a group, giving feedback and helping the students to develop a deeper understanding of the speech making process. It is significant that a communication center tutor offers the speaker feedback and not a critique of the oral project. Feedback offers the opportunity for collaboration and for speakers to use their critical thinking skills to take more responsibility for their presentations and their progress as a speaker (Schwartzman & Ellis, 2011). Speakers should not receive all the answers and be fed the next steps in the project. Communication centers strive for a transformational environment for the tutoring session where the speaker engages in critical thinking guided by the tutor who provides feedback and the opportunity for speakers to try out different ideas and scenarios in a safe environment with a supportive but also critical listener (Schwartzman & Ellis, 2011).

Another challenge that communication centers face is the fear of public speaking, also known as communication apprehension (CA). CA is

defined by McCroskey (2009) as the anxiety that speakers face throughout the speech-making process up to the time of the actual speaking event. As many as 70% of respondents report suffering from some degree of CA (Hancock, Stone, Brundage, & Zeigler, 2010; McCroskey, 2009). Even though the speaker may have a great deal of anxiety surrounding their actual speech performance, many also face anxiety about visiting a tutor to receive help (Kangas Dwyer, 2015). The speaker may be presenting in these sessions as well, or they could just be engaging in interpersonal communication surrounding their presentation. Although there should seemingly be less pressure to have a polished presentation in a tutoring session than in a graded class presentation, tutoring sessions can cause anxiety for many students. Past research has illustrated that the more a student visits a communication center, the more they report a reduction in anxiety and an increase in confidence (Kangas Dwyer, 2015). The current researchers will also explore the possible role communication center tutoring may play in reducing speech anxiety.

CA is split into two types: Trait Communication Apprehension (TCA) and State Communication Apprehension (SCA). TCA is a general pattern of anxiety that presents across communication contexts and is ingrained as a general belief of anxiety being a characteristic of a speaker's personality (McCroskey, 2009). In either a fifteen- or thirty-minute tutoring session, the researchers believe it is more than can be reasonably expected for tutors to make any meaningful change in reducing this anxiety. SCA, on the other hand, is a more targeted anxiety that depends on the context and specific situations surrounding the speaking event or past negative experiences with speaking in public (McCroskey, 2009).

Approaches to overcoming SCA generally have centered on systematic desensitization and skills training (Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt, 2009). A study on Exposure Therapy and its effects on SCA found that a "positive speaking experience allows for new contradictory information to be stored in the speaker's memory, and in future speaking situations, this new schema is activated, resulting in a decline in reported state PSA [Public Speaking Anxiety]" (Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt, 2009). Therefore, it is important to create a positive speaking experience, as a negative one can reinforce the fears of the speaker. It is a challenge of communication center tutoring to work through CA with their speakers in tutoring sessions and also to produce positive speaking experiences, or provide opportunities to develop the abilities to create positive speaking experiences in the future, in order to help speakers to start reducing their SCA. By directly addressing student concerns, we believe that SCA can be impacted in a targeted tutoring session with a trained tutor. Therefore:

H₃: Required tutoring sessions in a communication center will reduce students' state communication apprehension.

Method

Participants. Study participants were 245 undergraduate students enrolled in introductory public speaking classes at a large, southeastern university. These included 99 (40.41%) first-year students, 97 (39.59%) sophomores, 23 (9.39%) juniors, and 26 (10.61%) seniors. The sample consisted of 134 (54.69%) females and 110 (44.90%) males, with 1 student preferring not to answer. The average age of participants was 19.70 (ranging from 18 to 42 years). The racial/ethnic distribution was primarily Caucasian (86.53%).

The Course. Each participant, in both the test and control groups, was enrolled in a traditional, introductory public speaking course. The course is built around the NCA's eight public speaking competencies. Assignments in the class include both an informative and persuasive speech presentation. The course is supported by a communication center, which is staffed by undergraduate and graduate teaching assistants who serve as tutors. The communication lab (the name of the communication center at the institution studied) is available to tutor all students enrolled in introductory speech classes, not just the ones in this study, and assists these students with both crafting and delivering assigned speeches.

Procedures and Instrumentation.

All procedures received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to distribution of survey instruments. Participants were enrolled in 16 different introductory public speaking classes equally distributed between four instructors. Two class sections taught by each instructor were randomly assigned to a test group. Students in these sections were required to attend a fifteen-minute tutoring session at the study institution's communication lab prior to presenting two speeches during the course of the semester, an informative speech and a persuasive speech. Students in the test group who failed to fulfill the lab requirement before their assigned speech day were not allowed to present their speech and had to make up the presentation at a later date for reduced credit. Two class sections taught by each instructor were randomly assigned to a control group. Students in these sections were invited to visit the lab for additional aid throughout the semester at their own discretion, but this was optional and they received no class credit for doing so.

Tutoring sessions were segmented into fifteen-minute blocks. The content of these sessions were dependent upon the needs of the particular student. When a student entered into a tutoring session, the tutor determined with the speaker what issues were most pressing and focused on that for the amount of time they had together. Speakers first attended a tutoring session before their informative speech, and then later in the semester attended a tutoring session before their persuasive speech.

For the purposes of course evaluation and improvement, the persuasive speech was chosen for this study over the informative speech as it is the culminating speech in the course and weighted the highest. Though we did not study the earlier, informative speech, students in the test group did attend a tutoring session for that speech as well. Therefore, students in the test group would have attended two tutoring sessions prior to the speech presentation studied, and students in the control group would not have attended a tutoring session.

Following completion of their persuasive speech, each participant completed Richmond's (1978) Situational Communication Apprehension Measure (SCAM), a 20-item single dimensional measure. Participants were asked to respond on a scale between "1" (extremely inaccurate) and "7" (extremely accurate) to what degree statements represented how they felt during their persuasive speech. Sample statements included "I was self-assured" and "I was flustered." Half of the items were reverse coded. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .93 was found for this measure ($M = 71.10$, $SD = 21.51$).

Persuasive speeches for all 245 students were digitally recorded (in accordance with normal class procedures). A random sample of 120 speeches was taken, 60 speeches from the test group and 60 speeches from the control group. The

sample was stratified between all 16 sections of public speaking. The sample was then distributed among five reviewers. All five reviewers were experienced public speaking instructors who taught traditional public speaking classes at the study institution and who did not have students participating in the study. These reviewers were also all trained in the evaluation criteria in order to maintain evaluation fidelity (Stitt, Simonds, & Hunt, 2003). The sample was distributed by a sixth researcher who coded each digital file in such a way that the reviewers were unaware to which group each speech belonged. The sample was distributed so that each reviewer received an even number of test and control group cases. Further, to control for reviewer fatigue, the sample was distributed to reviewers in a random order, stratified to distribute test and control speeches evenly. All 120 speeches were then evaluated by the reviewers using a common rubric. Reviewers graded speeches on a scale between “1” (very unsatisfactory) and “7” (excellent) for each of eight outcomes. Each speech was also given a traditional, comprehensive grade between zero and 100. The grade was assigned employing a common rubric that evaluated speeches using the following guidelines: 40% organization, 40% delivery, and 20% research and supporting material.

The eight outcomes for which each speech was evaluated were taken from the National Communication Association (Morreale, Moore, Surges-Tatum, & Webster, 2007):

1. Chooses and narrows a topic appropriately for the audience and occasion
2. Communicates the thesis/specific purpose in a manner appropriate for audience and occasion
3. Provides supporting material (including presentation aids)

- appropriate to the audience and occasion
4. Uses an organizational pattern appropriate to topic, audience, occasion, and purpose
5. Uses language appropriate to the audience and occasion
6. Uses vocal variety in rate, pitch, and intensity to heighten and maintain interest appropriate to the audience and occasion
7. Uses pronunciation, grammar, and articulation appropriate to the audience and occasion
8. Uses physical behaviors that support the verbal message

Results

To explore H_1 and H_2 , independent sample t -tests were conducted to compare reviewer scores for the persuasive speeches evaluated along each of eight outcomes and the final grade assigned. Of the total sample ($N = 120$), 60 speeches were taken from classes not required to attend a tutoring session for the speech and 60 speeches were taken from classes required to attend a tutoring session. Results for these t -tests are found in Table 1. Participants who were required to attend a tutoring session scored significantly higher in outcome variables two, three, and four. On outcome variable two, “Communicates the thesis/specific purpose in a manner appropriate for audience and occasion,” students attending required tutoring sessions scored .38 higher on a seven-point scale ($p = .04$, $d = .38$). On outcome variable three, “Provides supporting material (including presentation aids) appropriate to the audience and occasion,” students attending required tutoring sessions scored .62 higher on a seven-point scale ($p < .00$, $d = .59$). On outcome variable four, “Uses an organizational pattern appropriate to topic,

audience, occasion, and purpose,” students attending required tutoring sessions scored .41 higher on a seven-point scale ($p = .02$, $d = .42$). Participants who were required to attend a tutoring session also scored higher on the assigned final grade with a mean difference of 4.33 on a 100-point scale ($p < .00$, $d = .54$). Given these results, H_1 was partially supported and H_2 was supported. To explore H_3 , an independent sample t -test was conducted to compare participants’ results on the SCAM. Of the total sample ($N = 245$), the control group class sections, which were not required to attend a lab tutoring session, contained 120 participants. It should be noted that approximately 4% of these students attended a tutoring session despite not being required to do so. The test group classes, which were required to attend a lab tutoring section, included 125 participants. No significant difference was found between the SCAM scores for participants not required to attend tutoring ($M = 72.45$, $SD = 17.92$) and those required to attend tutoring ($M = 69.80$, $SD = 24.47$); $t = .97$, $p = .33$. H_3 was not supported.

Discussion

This research illustrates both the value and the limitations of required public speaking tutoring sessions. While there was no difference between groups regarding state communication apprehension (H_3) or the student outcome variables that addressed either verbal or non-verbal delivery (outcome variables five through eight), the majority of the outcome variables that addressed issues related to organization and preparation (outcome variables two through four) did see statistically significant superior results for those students who attended a required tutoring session. These findings are not surprising given what can reasonably be expected from a single fifteen-minute

tutoring session: Fundamental improvements in verbal and nonverbal delivery simply take more time and feedback than is available in a single tutoring session. Informal feedback from the communication center tutors involved in this study supports this perspective. These tutors indicated that sessions necessarily focused more regularly on the speaker’s thesis and organization and only occasionally on delivery. Delivery could only be meaningfully addressed when a speaker came to a tutoring session already in the last stages of their speech-making process. In the case of the current study, that was not the norm.

Students clearly translated tutors’ feedback into fundamental improvements in their speech. These improvements included the development of a clear thesis, appropriate supporting material, and an effective organizational pattern. While these improvements resulted in improved final grades, they did not translate into reduced SCA on the day of the speech. The lack of impact on apprehension is also not surprising when tutoring sessions are focusing on the organizational issues of a specific speech and not broader skills training for the student (Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt, 2009). In addition, as it was the persuasive speech that was studied, the students in the test group had already attended a tutoring session for their informative speech earlier in the semester and both groups had presented several shorter speeches. Progress may have been made on SCA earlier in the semester than on this particular speech that took place later in the term.

Speaker’s speech topics vary widely and individualized support is therefore important. The communication center provides students with the space and time to get personalized attention based on their topic and needs that are not possible in a

regular fifty-minute class. Our findings also support earlier research that found that communication centers “helped student speeches become more coherent and cogent, thereby increasing the quality of academic performance” (Yook, 2012). By receiving the individual attention of a tutor who helps them to think critically about their organization and sources, they are more likely to be able to establish solid foundations to their speeches than students who did not receive this instruction, which would seem to often justify a higher grade by those who received this attention than those who did not.

Going forward, knowing that communication centers directly and significantly influence student outcomes may help in gaining more faculty, student, and administrative support. This study suggests that students who attend tutoring sessions, even relatively short 15-minute sessions, do better in their presentations than students who do not attend tutoring sessions. Future research should explore the effect of longer tutoring sessions since, theoretically, tutors and speakers may be able to cover more material and establish a stronger connection. Taking this evidence and the knowledge gained to faculty and administration can help in promoting the work being done in communication centers and help students to see the value of attending a tutoring session.

Limitations

The findings illustrating improved final speech grades should be viewed with some understanding of their limitations. The rubric the researchers used when watching the speeches was the common rubric used at the institution where the study took place, and there would be differences between this rubric and rubrics used elsewhere. This rubric employs the eight NCA competencies

but also expands on them, adding in such factors as “Topic is challenging,” “Clear transitions between main points,” and “Effective use of persuasive methods,” among other specifics. While these are not wholly separate from the NCA competencies, they are sometimes more specific. It should also be pointed out that, like most speech grading rubrics, the rubric employed for this study did not evenly distribute the grade between the eight NCA competencies. The rubric gave greater value to some outcomes relative to others (e.g., research and outside support accounts for 20% of the grade).

Also, the speech studied was one of the last speeches that the students delivered in their class. When looking at SCA, our study could have been hindered by the fact that these students had been working through their apprehension for most of the semester before they were surveyed. If apprehension were studied earlier there may have been different findings. It is also possible that if tutoring sessions focused more deliberately on apprehension we could see a more marked difference in these levels. Anderson, Berkshire Hearit, Morgan, and Natt (2015) found that “the lab’s need for efficiency and effectiveness did not align with the students’ need for a supportive learning environment” (p. 9). While the lab provides a safe place for students to work through apprehension, our results suggest that longer sessions or more overt apprehension training than was provided may be necessary to significantly impact speakers in their SCA.

Finally, though this study addresses grade improvement for speakers who attended tutoring sessions, Schwartzman and Ellis’s (2011) warning should be noted when focusing specifically on grades. When foregrounding grades (in a transactional approach) they warn, “Consumerism heavily emphasizes getting, but this stress on

acquisition actually disempowers students by eliding the importance being or becoming—engaged citizens, responsible parents, etc.—without regard to attendant paybacks or rewards” (p. 62). While grade improvement is very important, further research into students’ perceptions of competence, anxiety, and continual development could shed more light on the transformational nature of the tutoring sessions, or show if the transactional approach is being foregrounded. According to Schwartzman and Ellis, these sessions should not end with grade improvement, but should continue so as to establish a connection with the speaker and to promote continuous development as a speaker and as a citizen.

Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of required communication center tutoring and how it helped public speaking students prepare for and deliver their speeches. The results suggest that communication centers significantly help students in their organization and support. Specifically, this study found that there was a significant improvement on final speech grades for students who attended tutoring sessions in the communication lab, as well as the students gaining a better understanding of how to support the claims laid out in their speech. However, as shown by the fact that only 4% of students who were not required to attend a tutoring session elected to do so, more incentives or explanations of the benefits seem necessary to encourage students to attend sessions when they are not required. As Ender and Newton wrote in 2000, “Many students are not familiar with their campus and community resources, and thus are unable to take advantage of them” (p. 213). If students do not know the benefits or understand the

help available at a communication center, they will not see the advantage of attending these sessions. Therefore, support from the faculty and administration for these resources and a good introduction to their benefits from professors would help students be more aware of the help they can receive.

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