GENERAL INTEREST

Frame Analysis: Students’ Construction of Involvement and Noninvolvement in the College Classroom

Broken Up but Not Broken: Satisfaction, Adjustment, and Communication in Post-Dissolutional Relationships

The Art of “Jesse-Talk”: Speechwriting for Governor Jesse Ventura

Paws, Pathos and Presidential Persuasion: Franklin Roosevelt’s “Fala Speech” as Precursor and Model for Richard Nixon’s “Checkers Speech”

Explaining the Revolution: Vernacular Discourse and the Tipping Point in America’s 2006 Midterm Election

Twenty-Three Days: An Autoethnographic Account of the Washington, D.C. Sniper Shootings

TEACHER’S WORKBOOK

Identifying Teaching Effectiveness: Using Student Skill Surveys, Speech Evaluations, and Quiz Scores to Inform Instruction

Using Seinfeld to Enhance Storytelling Speeches

Group Dynamics: Managing Interpersonal Conflict in the Group Decision Making Process
Editor’s Note

During the 2006-2007 academic year, the CTAM Board of Governors decided that the CTAM Journal would go to an all-online format, beginning with Volume 34 (2007). With this change, we remain dedicated to producing a high quality journal comprised of articles that have gone through a rigorous review process, while allowing increased access of the journal to a wider audience.

The Journal is available at the CTAM Website: http://www.mnsu.edu/cmst/ctam/journal.html
COMMUNICATION AND THEATER ASSOCIATION OF MINNESOTA JOURNAL

Volume 37 Summer 2010

2010 Annual CTAM Conference
Saint Cloud, MN
September 17-18, 2010

EDITOR
Aileen Buslig
Concordia College-Moorhead

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Stephanie Villella
Concordia College-Moorhead

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Stephanie Ahlfeldt, Concordia College-Moorhead
Greg Carlson, Concordia College-Moorhead
Verna Corgan, Hamline University
Michael Dreher, Bethel University
Kathryn Kelley, Metropolitan State University
Anthony Ocaña, Concordia College-Moorhead
David Wintersteen, Concordia College-Moorhead

CTAM ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS
Mark Fokken, Southwest MN State University, President
Cliff Janke, Fairmont High School, Past President
Scott Durocher, East High School, President-Elect
Larry Schnoor, Retired, Treasurer
Aileen Buslig, Concordia College, Journal Editor
Cynthia Carver, Concordia College, Historian
Dave Brennan, MN State University, Mankato, Newsletter Editor
Jan Urtel, Mankato East Senior High School, Secretary
mark.fokken@smsu.edu
cjanke@fairmont.k12.mn.us
scott.durocher@district196.org
lschnoor@hickorytech.net
buslig@cord.edu
carver@cord.edu
brennan.davidj@gmail.com
jurtel1@isd77.k12.mn.us

CTAM Website: http://www.mnsu.edu/cmst/ctam/index.html

The Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal is published annually, usually in the summer, by the COMMUNICATION AND THEATER ASSOCIATION OF MINNESOTA. Regular membership in CTAM includes the journal subscription. CTAM membership information may be obtained from any of the officers or by visiting the CTAM website at www.ctam.us/. Academic institutions or departments may place advertisements in the Journal by contacting the editor.
COMMUNICATION AND THEATER ASSOCIATION
OF MINNESOTA JOURNAL

Volume 37          Summer 2010

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GENERAL INTEREST

Frame Analysis: Students’ Construction of Involvement and Noninvolvement in the College Classroom
Robert J. Sidelinger and Derek M. Bolen ................................................................................................................ .....7

Broken Up but Not Broken: Satisfaction, Adjustment, and Communication in Post-Dissolutional Relationships
Stephanie Villella.......................................................................................................................................................  27

The Art of “Jesse-Talk”: Speechwriting for Governor Jesse Ventura
Kristine Bruss.............................................................................................................................................................  47

Paws, Pathos and Presidential Persuasion: Franklin Roosevelt’s “Fala Speech” as Precursor
and Model for Richard Nixon’s “Checkers Speech”
John Llewellyn...........................................................................................................................................................  64

Explaining the Revolution: Vernacular Discourse and the Tipping Point in America’s 2006 Midterm Election
Ryan M. Shepard .......................................................................................................................................................  76

Twenty-Three Days: An Autoethnographic Account of the Washington, D.C. Sniper Shootings
Chelsea Jordan Gutshall.............................................................................................................................................  99

TEACHER’S WORKBOOK

Identifying Teaching Effectiveness: Using Student Skill Surveys, Speech Evaluations, and Quiz Scores to Inform
Instruction
Sally Blomstrom ......................................................................................................................................................  116

Using Seinfeld to Enhance Storytelling Speeches
Kelly Soezka Kaiser ..................................................................................................................................................  133

Group Dynamics: Managing Interpersonal Conflict in the Group Decision Making Process
Brandon J. Sernler & Stuart A. Schneider...............................................................................................................  138
CTAM JOURNAL MISSION STATEMENT

The Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal (CTAMJ) is the scholarly journal of the Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota (CTAM). The journal is an outlet for articles related to issues of discipline-related importance including articles discussing innovative teaching methods. All theoretical and methodological approaches are welcome.

Authors should submit an electronic copy of their work as a Word document by e-mail to the editor. A separate, electronic title page should include a 100-125 word abstract of the article, author’s name and professional title, job title, the school or institutional affiliation of the author/s, a mailing address, and an e-mail address. Care should be taken that author identification has been removed from the manuscript itself for review purposes. All manuscripts should be prepared according to current APA or MLA guidelines.

CTAMJ encourages contributions from scholars and practitioners, who comprise all segments of the journal’s readership, including K-12 educators, graduate school, community college, and college or university groups. The journal welcomes theoretical and applied articles from both the theater and communication disciplines. Capable scholars in the appropriate field will blindly review all general manuscripts.

No work will be accepted or rejected purely on the basis of its methodology or subject. Author sex, race, ethnic background, geographical location or work affiliation (secondary/college level, department, etc.) of the author(s) are never considered in making editorial judgments. The demands of the disciplines of speech communication and theater are key factors in the editorial judgments made. All editorial decisions attempt to balance these demands with the needs and interests of the journal’s readers.

The journal is guided by three key principles:

- To provide an outlet for the expression of diverse ideas.
- To publish high quality scholarship in the disciplines of Speech Communication and Theater.
- To meet the journal-related needs of CTAM and its members.

EDITORIAL POLICY

The call for Manuscripts goes out in the fall of the year and the deadline for submissions is in March of the following year. Details of how to submit are given in the Call which is sent to all members, departments, and announced in SPECTRA. Book review ideas should be queried with the editor in advance of the submission date. Book reviews are generally published if accepted on a space available basis. All articles are read anonymously by at least two associate editors. All author identification markings are removed from the articles and no editor reads the work of a colleague. Associate editors may submit articles to the journal, but their work must go through the process of blind review, just as any other submitter. The journal editor facilitates the process and makes final decisions based on the associate editor’s recommendations and comments. If there are any questions about the process, please direct them to the journal editor.

PERMISSIONS STATEMENT

CTAM encourages scholars to use and make reference to work published in our journal. Scholars may quote, without permission, in order to document their own work. The Journal assumes each scholar shall be responsible in acknowledging and properly documenting such uses. Teachers may reproduce and distribute, free of copyright charges, portions of this journal solely for educational purposes. Any reproduction and distribution must acknowledge in writing the Journal as the primary source of the material.
CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS VOLUME 38, SUMMER 2011

The Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal is seeking manuscripts for Volume 38, scheduled for publication in summer 2011. The journal welcomes theoretical and applied articles and teaching suggestions from theater, communication and forensics professionals from secondary and collegiate levels. All general articles will undergo a blind review process by a minimum of two reviewers. Manuscripts may be submitted for one of two sections: general interest research and essays, and teacher’s workbook. Please indicate whether the manuscript is intended for the (1) general interest research and essays section, or the (2) teacher’s workbook section. Contact the editor concerning book review proposals.

A new feature has also been added to the CTAM Journal, called “On the Web.” With new and interesting Internet sources arising all the time, discovering these websites on one’s own is not always easy. Intended as a way to help CTAMJ readers find the best websites for use in the classroom, “On the Web” was introduced in Volume 35 as a means of bringing these websites together thematically in one place. If you have found an innovative use of the Internet in your classroom, consider submitting your discovery for inclusion in the next issue of CTAMJ.

Authors should submit an electronic copy of their work as a Word document by e-mail to the editor. A separate electronic title page should include a 100-125 word abstract of the article, author’s name and professional title, job title, the school or institutional affiliation of the author/s, a mailing address, and an e-mail address. Care should be taken that author identification has been removed from the manuscript itself for review purposes. All manuscripts should be prepared according to current APA or MLA guidelines. Authors are reminded to keep the Journal audience in mind: students and teachers at the high school, community college, private college, and university levels. All manuscripts must be submitted by March 31, 2011. Please e-mail manuscripts and any questions to Aileen Buslig, CTAM Journal Editor, buslig@cord.edu
Frame Analysis: Students’ Construction of Involvement and Noninvolvement in the College Classroom

Robert J. Sidelinger
Assistant Professor
sideling@oakland.edu
Department of Communication and Journalism
Oakland University
Rochester, MI

Derek M. Bolen
Doctoral Student
dmbolen@wayne.edu
Department of Communication
Wayne State University
Detroit, MI

ABSTRACT
Frames and frame analysis examines the individual’s constructions of reality instead of society’s social constructions. The aim of this qualitative study is to explore college students’ (N = 434) construction of involvement and noninvolvement in the classroom from a frame analysis perspective. Six themes emerged from students’ descriptions of their perceptions of self and other students’ in-class involvement (e.g., active involvement), and eight themes emerged from descriptions of self and other students’ in-class noninvolvement (e.g., student passivity). Overall, students are likely to perceive themselves as involved and other students as noninvolved, even when the classroom behaviors are similar (e.g., listening, taking notes).

In her editorial, Creeping Passivity, Ann Cutler (2007) noticed a disturbing trend in her college classrooms: never before had she experienced such nonparticipation. Even though her classes consisted of a larger-than-usual number of students who were well prepared for the college classroom experience, she stated, “students were stunningly disengaged” (p. 6). Cutler further wrote that her students just sat there silently, taking whatever she was handing out, as questions were asked or uncertainties probed. Worried that she was becoming overbearing or nonimmediate, Cutler questioned her colleagues who also stated they were experiencing the same silent passivity in the classrooms as well. She was concerned that the classroom climate was shifting to one of student noninvolvement.

Cutler’s (2007) editorial received an avalanche of responses. The National Science Teachers Association (NSTA, 2007) website posted teachers’ comments and experiences from all levels of education. For example, an Educational Technologist at the University of Delaware, stated, “Getting any students at all to be responsive—to me or to each other—was like pulling teeth. Was I using PowerPoint too much? Was I boring everyone? Was I burning out and losing my enthusiasm?” (NSTA, 2007, para. 1). An Associate Professor of Earth Sciences at University of Indianapolis wrote:

I ask a question directed to the whole class and there is no response, no volunteering of answers; after a little wait[ing] I call on one person and the answer given is “I don’t
know,” even if it is a fairly open-ended question about something they probably did experience or observe. After several more “I don't knows” and not without some prompting in a Socratic type of way, I just give up. Then it is back to the old lecture mode. (para. 48)

Some of the feedback posted also offered insight for enhancing student involvement in the college classroom, such as in-class activities or small group discussions. Overall, the numerous postings on the NSTA (2007) website captured the extensive problem of passivity in the college classroom.

Post-secondary institutions are transforming classrooms from being teacher-centered to student-centered (Huba & Freed, 2000). Even though Cutler’s (2007) editorial and the subsequent feedback centered on the experience of science courses, student performance should be considered the most important outcome of any classroom experience (Hirschy & Wilson, 2002; Page & Mukherjee, 2000). Therefore involvement is a campus-wide responsibility (Hunter, 2006). Hence, it is essential that educators and scholars across disciplines consider student involvement from the students’ lens in an effort to promote student learning and improve overall student performance. However, Page and Mukherjee (2000) stated, “While the goal is clear and laudable, its achievement is not easy because the typical undergraduate student is apathetic about education” (p. 548). The aim of this study is to explore students’ construction of involvement and noninvolvement in the college classroom from a frame analysis lens.

Student Involvement

Student involvement in the college classroom has implications for educational processes and learning outcomes. Astin (1999) defined student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). Astin, in an interview with Richmond (1986), indicated higher education is in competition with other forces for students’ energy such as job and family, and it is imperative for colleges and universities to prevail in this competition. Astin (1993, 1999) also differentiated between highly involved and noninvolved students. Students who are highly involved devote a great deal of energy to studying, spend a lot of time on campus, actively participate in student organizations, and regularly interact with faculty and other students. On the other hand, noninvolved students neglect studies, are hardly ever on campus, do not participate in student organizations, and have little contact with faculty and other students. Astin developed the theory of student involvement in part to guide researchers in their investigation of student development and as well as to assist college administrators and faculty in their design of more effective learning environments.

Astin’s (1999) theory of student involvement centers on the behavioral aspects of involvement. As he puts it, “it is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does, how he or she behaves, that defines and identifies involvement” (p. 519). Astin contended involvement is a behavioral construct, and he offered an extensive list of active terms that reflect his notion of student involvement. To better understand what involvement
means, Astin’s list included such active terms as: attach one’s self to; engage in; participate in; take an interest in; devote oneself to; and tackle.

Tinto (1997) stated student involvement matters, in that the greater the involvement in college life the greater the acquisition of knowledge and development of skills. Moreover, student involvement with faculty enhances their development (Astin, 1993). Likewise, Endo and Harpel (1982) found students who reported higher levels of involvement with their instructors also demonstrated higher levels of learning gain. Moreover, Milem and Berger (1997) advocated early involvement with faculty since it tends to have a positive influence on student persistence. Thus, when students are involved in their courses they are more apt to learn and succeed (Smith & Wolf-Wendel, 2005; Kuh, 2007). When students become engaged they “develop habits that promise to stand them in good stead for a lifetime of continuous learning” (Kuh, p. B12). As Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) stated, involvement is not only important while students are in college but it will help to prepare them for life after college. Similarly, Weaver and Qi (2005) wrote, “Students who actively participate in the learning process learn more than those who do not” (p. 570). Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) referred to students speaking in class by asking and answering questions, making comments, and participating in discussions as class participation. Petress (2006) offered an operational definition of class participation, stating, “Optimum class management and effectiveness depends on students being actively engaged, supportive of each other, and civil in their exchanges” (p. 821). Petress also framed class participation as encompassing three evaluative dimensions: quantity, dependability, and quality. Quantity does not mean that some students should become discussion monopolizers. However, all students should be given the opportunity to participate by asking questions, offering examples, and supplying evidence of personal awareness of topic concepts. Students should also be dependable; they need to regularly attend class in order to participate. When they are in class they need to actively attend to the day’s topic. For quality, students should not ask questions for the sake of it (e.g., superficial questions). Contributions to class discussion should be meaningful and relevant.

Class participation can come in many forms, and Wade (1994) stated that an ideal class discussion happens when almost all students are engaged and interested, are learning, and listening attentively to their peer’s comments and suggestions. From the students’ point of view there are also many reasons why they choose to participate or to not participate. Howard and Henney (1998) found, from interviews and surveys, why student participate or why they do not participate in the classroom. The top four reasons for participation were: seeking information or clarification; have something to contribute to class; learning by participating; and overall enjoyment in participation. The top four reasons for nonparticipation were: ideas not well formulated; lack of knowledge about the subject matter; likelihood of appearing unintelligent in the eyes of other students; and not doing the assigned reading.
Frames, Framing, and Involvement

Erving Goffman (1974) wrote Frame Analysis: An essay on the Organization of Experience as a sort of calling into being of the theory that had informed his expansive body of work—most notably Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959). Goffman (1974) offered the following as a definition for his body of work’s informing theory, frame and frame analysis:

I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify. That is my definition of frame. My phrase ‘frame analysis’ is a slogan to refer to the examination in these terms of the organization of experience. (pp. 10-11)

Goffman’s frames and frame analysis focus on the individual’s organization of experience, not society. In postmodern terms, frames and frame analysis examines the individual’s constructions of reality instead of society’s social constructions. Our frameworks allow us to make sense of what is happening around us based on our prior experience. Primary frameworks are the frameworks that, when combined with other similarly socialized individuals, constitute a portion of that social group’s culture. As we move through situations in our lives, according to Goffman, we refer to frames for information on how to proceed. Frames determine the way that we are able to think about a situation, how we respond, and what our participation and involvement will be.

In terms of classroom participation, a frame “organizes involvement” (Goffman, 1974, p. 345). As individuals make sense of the situation they find themselves in, “participants will ordinarily not only obtain a sense of what is going on but will also (in some degree) become spontaneously engrossed, caught up, enthralled” (Goffman, 1974, p. 345). Within frames are the rules and norms for levels of participation unique to that situation. All frames have different levels of participation expectations because these frames are unique, but “in all cases … understood limits will be established, a definition concerning what is insufficient involvement and what is too much” (Goffman, 1974, p. 345). No frame is without an expectation for level of participation.

When individuals are not involved at the frame-determined level, others will react negatively according to the frame parameters. This isn’t to say that if in the classroom some students are not participating that others will encourage the participation. That would only hold true if the students in the classroom framed the classroom situation as having a necessity for involvement at the level that the instructor expects in his/her own frame. Therefore, it must be recognized that students can and probably will have differing frames from instructors concerning involvement.

Goffman (1974) calls involvement an “interlocking obligation” (p. 346). Breaking the frame more likely will manifest as students in the class participating too much. If the frame that the students appear to adhere to calls for very low levels of involvement in the situation (the classroom), then those who do not participate minimally are the ones breaking the frame. In effect, high participation and involvement in the framed situation means less manifested
participation/involvement in the eyes of the teacher. Those who are adhering to the frame will stand against those who do not. Goffman says, “Whether the individual maintains too little or too much involvement, he [sic] will have reason to manage the show of his [sic] involvement in order to minimize its disruptive effect on participants” (1974, p. 346). He also notes, “Some deviation from the norm is tolerated” (pp. 346-347). This could account for classes that appear to always participate well according to the instructor’s frame standards.

According to Goffman’s (1974) frame theory, if participation (involvement) from students was ever framed the same as instructors’ frame, then the frame of non-participating was broken. Reframing is the positive result of a broken frame. At some point, “for whatever reasons, the individual breaks frame and perceives he [sic] has done so, the nature of his engrossment and belief suddenly changes” (p. 378). Everyone who has not rejected the frame faces the individual rejecting the frame. If framing is to provide insight to lack of classroom participation, the framing of the classroom from the student’s perspective must be examined. This should be accomplished by examining students’ perceptions of classroom participation in terms of others and self.

For this study, undergraduate students were asked to react to the issue of involvement/noninvolvement in the college classroom. Since numerous postings on the NSTA (2007, July) website captured the extensive problem of passivity in the college classroom from the instructors’ lens, this study examined the issue from the students’ lens. Open-ended questions served to elicit the student’s perspective of whether or not involvement existed in the college classroom. Moreover, students were asked to describe why involvement does or does not exist in the college classroom. The research question asked:

RQ1: What are students’ perceptions of involvement/noninvolvement in the college classroom?

To address this question, participants responded to several open-ended questions:

- In general do you consider yourself to be involved in the classroom?
- If yes, describe how you are involved. If no, describe how you are not involved?
- In general, do you think other students are involved in the classroom?
- If yes, how are students involved. If no, how are students not involved?

Beyond looking at how, a secondary question addressed why students are involved or noninvolved. Following the first question, students were asked why they are involved in the college classroom or why they think other students in general are involved in the college classroom. These open-ended questions yielded a thick description of student in-class involvement/ noninvolvement from the students’ point of view. Also, by asking students to describe perceptions of their involvement and of other students’ involvement helped to determine if attribution differs between descriptions of self and descriptions of others. Attribution theory offers an explanation for how we make sense of our own behaviors as well as other’s behaviors. Attribution theory suggests when explaining our own behaviors we use external attributions in
which our behaviors are caused by external circumstances or environmental factors. In contrast, when explaining other’s behaviors we use internal attributions, in which their behaviors are caused by internal factors, thus the individual is responsible for the behavior (McPherson, Kearney, & Plax, 2006).

**Methodology**

**Participants and Procedures**

Participants consisted of 434 (n = 201 males, n = 233 females) undergraduate students across academic ranks (n = 75 freshmen, n = 106 sophomores, n = 141 juniors, n = 112 seniors), in introductory and upper-level communication courses at a research intensive public university. The students voluntarily participated and survey administration took place during normal class time. Participants were informed that their participation was completely voluntary, anonymous, and neither their class standing nor athletic status was affected if they decided not to participate in part or wholly in the study. The university’s Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) approved this study.

The students’ mean age was 20.40 (SD = 1.92), range 17 to 39. For freshmen, the mean age was 18.31 (SD = .49), sophomores (M = 19.70, SD = 1.35), juniors (M = 20.72, SD = 1.77), and seniors (M = 21.98, SD = 1.38). The majority of the sample was Caucasian (n = 393), 14 identified as African American, 14 as Hispanic or Latino, six as Asian, two as Native American, one as Pacific Islander, and two as Other. Overall, the majority of the sample consisted of full-time students (n = 428 full-time, n = 3 part-time, n = 3 no response), who had a variety of different majors (N = 54).

**Coding**

The research question examined students’ perceptions of involvement in the college classroom. Students responded to open-ended questions, which asked them to describe their perceptions of student involvement in the college classroom. This study followed basic interpretative qualitative research. After a content analysis of student responses, participants’ written responses were grouped based on similarities of statements in order to allow themes to naturally emerge from the open-ended questions.

Several steps were undertaken to code the open-ended responses describing in-class involvement/ noninvolvement. The multi-stage framework was based on Bulmer’s (1979) guidelines. The first author read and re-read participants’ responses to the questions referring to other student’s in-class involvement/ noninvolvement and their responses to their own in-class involvement/ noninvolvement. Given participants just elaborated from the first question to the second question, the two questions for other students’ in-class involvement/ noninvolvement were collapsed. Similarly, the participants often elaborated from the first question to the second
question when describing their own in-class involvement or noninvolvement. Thus, those two questions were also collapsed. Again, all responses were examined and non-repetitive units were transferred to index cards. With over 400 descriptions for each question, the study reached data saturation; the researcher no longer saw new information in students’ responses. Then the cards were sorted into preliminary conceptual themes. A communication faculty member subsequently reviewed the deck of cards in order to identify conceptual overlap, gaps, or unique perspectives on the emerging themes. A codebook was created, and all students’ responses were re-examined and coded into either involvement or noninvolvement themes (Tables 1 and 2 in the Appendix). Six themes emerged from students’ descriptions of their perceptions of self and other students’ in-class involvement (Table 1) and eight themes emerged from descriptions of self and other students’ in-class noninvolvement (Table 2). Finally, the first author examined all sorts and organized the final involvement/ noninvolvement category structure, with examples, for coding. These themes addressed students’ perceptions of involvement/ noninvolvement in the college classroom.

Again, there were six involvement themes that emerged from students’ descriptions. The first theme was Active Involvement. This theme included such descriptions as talking one-on-one with the instructor, discussions in small groups, offering opinions, sharing ideas and experiences, and asking and answering questions. The second theme was Passive Involvement, and included such descriptions as doing homework, listening, paying attention, taking notes, and showing up to class on time. The third theme was Instructor Factors. Students offered such descriptions as: calls on students, creates a positive atmosphere, is open and caring, and offers opportunities for engagement for this theme. The fourth theme was Course Type & Structure, which included such descriptions as it’s a course in my major, it’s a smaller class, and participation is a requirement for a grade. The fifth theme was Outcomes for Involvement. This theme included such descriptions as helping others to learn, helps make a better class environment, makes class interesting, and enhances learning. Lastly, the sixth theme was Student Factors, which included descriptions such as personality of students, I do it more than others, no one else will do it so I will, students do it when they are comfortable, knowledgeable about topic, and academic rank.

There were eight themes for noninvolvement that emerged from students’ responses. The first theme was Student Passivity, which included such descriptions as no verbal participation in class, I just sit there and take notes, just want the information, just there for the grade, and prefer to listen. The second theme was Student Factors ~ Self. For this theme students offered such responses as hate the spotlight, shy, lazy, poor attention span, I have no initiative, and don’t take the class seriously. The third theme was Student Factors ~ Others, which included such descriptions as peer influence to be quiet, not comfortable with peers, and rely on others to talk. The fourth theme was Instructor Factors. For this theme students offered such descriptions as instructor just lectures, instructor isn’t a good teacher, teacher doesn’t force it, and teacher rushes through the material. The fifth theme was Course Type & Structure, which included descriptions such as class is too large, class isn’t exciting, and class is a requirement. The sixth theme was Alternatives to Involvement, and for this theme descriptions included distractions (e.g., cell
phones, laptops, and newspapers), sleeping in class, not doing the readings, and not attending class. The seventh theme was *Lack of Perceived Benefits*. This theme included such descriptions as no reward for doing it, just want to get by, no value for involvement, and it’s not that important. Finally, the eighth theme was *Fear of Negative Repercussions*, which included descriptions like don’t want to be judged, don’t want to be laughed at by peers or teacher, fear of being wrong, and fear of looking dumb.

**Results**

To address the first part of the research question, 426 participants offered descriptions of other students’ involvement/noninvolvement in the college classroom. For perceptions of their peers, 75 participants indicated that both involvement and noninvolvement existed in the college classroom, 122 participants described only involvement and 230 participants described only noninvolvement.

A total of 195 participants, including those that indicated both involvement and noninvolvement existed, offered 362 descriptions of their perceptions of other students’ in-class involvement. In order of descending frequency, 33.7% of the participants described other students’ involvement as Active Involvement ($n = 122$); 27.3% described involvement as Outcomes of Involvement ($n = 99$); 12.7% described involvement as Student Factors ($n = 46$); 9.9% described involvement as Passive Involvement ($n = 36$); 9.1% described involvement as Course Type & Structure ($n = 33$); and 7.2% described involvement as Instructor Factors ($n = 26$).

A total of 296 participants offered 590 descriptions of their perceptions of other students’ in-class noninvolvement. In order of descending frequency, 23.9% of the participants described other students’ noninvolvement as Student Factors $\sim$ Self ($n = 141$); 21.5% described noninvolvement as Student Passivity ($n = 127$); 17.1% described noninvolvement as Course Type & Structure ($n = 101$); 8.1% described noninvolvement as Fear of Negative Repercussions ($n = 48$); 8% described noninvolvement as Instructor Factors ($n = 47$); 7.3% described noninvolvement as Student Factors $\sim$ Others ($n = 43$); 7.1% described noninvolvement as Alternatives to Involvement ($n = 42$); and 6.9% described noninvolvement as Lack of Perceived Benefits ($n = 41$).

Next, 432 of the participants offered descriptions of their own involvement/noninvolvement in the college classroom. For perceptions of themselves, 52 participants indicated that both involvement and noninvolvement existed in the college classroom, 254 participants described only involvement and 126 participants described only noninvolvement.

A total of 306 participants offered 615 descriptions of their perceptions of their in-class involvement. In order of descending frequency, 24.4% of the participants described their involvement as Active Involvement ($n = 150$); 24.2% described involvement as Outcomes of Involvement ($n = 149$); 18.5% described involvement as Passive Involvement ($n = 114$); 13.1%...
described involvement as Student Factors \((n = 81)\); 10.1% described involvement as Course Type & Structure \((n = 62)\); and 9.6% described involvement as Instructor Factors \((n = 59)\).

A total of 178 participants offered 314 descriptions of their perceptions of their own in-class noninvolvement. In order of descending frequency, 28.6% of the participants described their noninvolvement as Student Passivity \((n = 90)\); 23.5% described noninvolvement as Student Factors \(\sim\) Self \((n = 74)\); 14.6% described noninvolvement as Course Type & Structure \((n = 46)\); 9.2% described noninvolvement as Student Factors \(\sim\) Others \((n = 29)\); 7.9% described noninvolvement as Lack of Perceived Benefits \((n = 25)\); 7.6% described noninvolvement as Instructor Factors \((n = 24)\); 5.7% described noninvolvement as Fear of Negative Repercussions \((n = 18)\); and 2.5% described noninvolvement as Alternatives to Involvement \((n = 8)\).

**Discussion**

Overall, students are likely to perceive themselves as involved and other students as noninvolved. Interestingly, students were also likely to perceive other students who just listen and take notes in class as noninvolvement (Student Passivity) while, in contrast, they reported their in-class listening and note taking as involvement (Passive Involvement). The way they perceived their behaviors and other students’ behaviors in the classroom was not similar.

Based on students’ written responses of their perceptions of self and others’ involvement and noninvolvement in the college classroom, six involvement themes emerged and eight noninvolvement themes emerged. Overall, students were more likely to perceive themselves as involved and other students as noninvolved.

The instructors played a vital role in encouraging student involvement. Students described being more involved when their instructors offered opportunities for engagement such as calling on students for feedback or using a discussion format instead of a lecture format in class. For example, one student stated, “I’m more involved when the teacher is good, the teacher talks with the students and asks questions,” on the other hand, another student commented, “sometimes it’s impossible for involvement when the teacher rushes through the material, there’s just not time for it.”

Some students reported that they were not actively involved in class because they knew if they did have questions or did not understand content they could wait till after class to ask their instructors for clarification. One student wrote, “I’m not really talkative in class, if I don’t understand what’s going on I just wait until after class is over and ask my teacher about it.” Another student stated, “I’m not very comfortable speaking up in class so when I have questions I ask them after class is over.”

Students who described themselves or others as noninvolved often stated they or others did not want to be in the classroom. One student offered this response to noninvolvement, “Classes are too big, you have such a big audience to present information to and little time to do it in. Students just want to take the class, pass it, and move on. [The] quicker [we’re] done with college, the better.” If students, who are not involved and do not want to be in class, believe their
instructors will deviate from a lecture when questions are asked may be less likely to ask questions. Question-asking takes up time and may increase the time students spend in class. Students who do not want to be there may avoid asking questions so that class will end as soon as possible. As one student put it, “It seems that the majority of college students just do the bare minimum to get by with the ultimate goal of getting that diploma.” These responses are based on the traditional classroom. Mediated communication (e.g., e-mail, Facebook) may be changing the perceptions of student involvement. Future research should consider students’ responses from the online setting to compare to involvement in the traditional classroom setting.

Beyond the instructor, course type and structure influenced student in-class involvement. For this study, students reported more frequent in-class involvement in smaller classes than larger classes. Prior research has indicated class size can influence the classroom experience (Chatman, 1997). There is an inverse relationship between size and performance, in which the larger the class size the worse students perform (Chatman, 1997; Gibbs & Lucas, 1996). Moreover, students in large classes report a lack of involvement, lack of individualized attention from instructor, and an inhibition of student-instructor communication (Smith, Kopfman, & Ahyun, 1996). Similarly, Kendrick and Darling (1990) found an inverse relationship between class size and student clarifying tactics (e.g., question-asking). In larger class sizes clarifying tactics decrease. Neer and Kircher (1989) found classroom participation and discussion were mediated by interpersonal familiarity and acceptance. Students were more comfortable communicating in small groups rather than with the entire class. However, previous research offers mixed results concerning class size in that student performance and classroom interactions were not necessarily a function of class size (Toth & Montagna, 2002). For example, Papo (1999) indicated larger class sizes do not negatively affect students’ perceptions of teaching effectiveness and that perceptions of learning are based more on teaching methods rather than student enrollment. In their responses to the open-ended questions on involvement, many students referred to class size, one student stated, “Now that I am taking classes that are smaller and in my major I find I am a lot more involved than I was before in larger classes.” These students’ statements also coincide with their reports for nonparticipation, in that the nonparticipation measure item, “the class is too large,” yielded the highest mean compared to the other nonparticipation measure items.

Not only did course type and structure play a role in involvement, student factors also had an impact on involvement. Many students offered several reasons for noninvolvement in the classroom such as being shy or nervous. For noninvolvement, a student offered, “No, it seems that at this university most students are either afraid to speak up or just choose not to, especially in larger classes.” Some students may experience communication apprehension in the classroom. Communication apprehension (CA), defined as “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78), can be experienced in four general communication contexts: interpersonal, small group, large meeting, and public speaking. McCroskey surveyed 20,000 college students, and found 15 to 20% suffered from high communication apprehension, which
was severe enough to interfere with their normal functioning in the classroom. Booth-Butterfield (1988) stated, “students with CA will feel anxious and wish to avoid communicating in most situations” (p. 214). Thus, students with high CA are at a much greater disadvantage in the classroom than students with low or even moderate levels of communication apprehension (Bourhis & Allen, 1992). Allen, Long, O’Mara, and Judd (2008) found high CA students reported less satisfaction with their instructors and believed they learned less in the classroom. For some students, the effects of communication apprehension are debilitating to the learning process (Edwards & Walker, 2007). This is reinforced in this study as some students reported being too shy to actively involve themselves in the classroom.

However, there may be other post hoc explanations for using shyness or nervousness as a reason for noninvolvement. Another explanation may be students engage in learned helplessness. The Theory of Learned Helplessness refers to deficits in thoughts, feelings, and actions; exposure to uncontrollable events; or the cognitive account of how the operations lead to the deficits (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993). Coined by Martin Seligman, it is considered a psychological condition in which individuals believe they are helpless in a particular situation (Maier & Seligman, 1976). Three critical components serve as a foundation for the theory: contingency, cognition, and behavior. Contingency consists of the objective relationship between individuals’ actions and the outcomes of those actions. The cognition component is reflected in the way individuals interpret and explain the contingency. Behavior is the observable consequences of the contingency and the cognition about it. Peterson et al. (1993) claim that “learned helplessness has been used in three ways: to refer to noncontingency, to the expectation of helplessness, and to passive behavior” (p. 9). Individuals engage in passivity when they learn that responding to an event is futile. However, individuals can also learn to be helpless through the observations of others and may not necessarily be exposed to the uncontrollable event. Moreover, Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder (1982) suggested the helplessness theory offers individuals the opportunity to reframe diminished control over events. Helplessness enables people to sustain secondary control over events in which they lost primary control. Overall, primary control is likely to be an individual’s first response to uncontrollability. If that fails, then secondary control may succeed. According to Peterson et al., “If a person is able to accept uncontrollable events and derive meaning from them, then he [she] will not be disrupted by them” (p. 137). For example, a secondary control, termed illusionary control does not directly influence events; however, the individual still believes events are orderly. In essence, the individual believes that “fate deals the cards, but it is possible to synchronize oneself with fate” (Peterson et al., p. 137). Individuals deny themselves personal control over events. Essentially, helplessness allows individuals to find meaning when confronted with negative events, and the found meaning or answer creates an adaptive situation.

Individuals engage in learned helplessness when they believe they can do nothing to make a difference, have little or no power over themselves or external events. When students reported being too shy to engage in in-class involvement they may just be using “shyness” as a form of learned helplessness to make sense of their passive behaviors and externalize attribution.
A third explanation for using shyness or nervousness as a reason for noninvolvement is self-handicapping. Self-handicapping involves creating barriers to successful performance (Leondari & Gonida, 2007). This allows individuals to provide themselves with an excuse for poor performance (Waschbusch, Craig, Pelham, & King, 2007), and enables them to externalize attribution (e.g., “I can’t talk in class because I’m too shy”). Self-handicapping protects individuals’ self-worth and is more likely to occur when individuals perceive the task performance as a reflection of themselves (Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996). Ommundsen, Haugen, and Lund (2005) offered the example, “Some students deliberately put off studying to the last moment, or use other ‘self-handicapping’ strategies, so that if the subsequent performance is at a low level, these circumstances, rather than the lack of ability, may be considered the cause” (p. 462). Self-handicapping strategies can take on different forms, such as behavioral self-handicaps and self-reported self-handicaps. Students who report a lack of sleep or being “hung over” engage in behavioral self-handicapping, while students who claim test or social anxieties engage in self-reported self-handicapping. These strategies may offer the immediate benefit of self-protection but Zuckerman and Tsai (2005) found self-handicapping is costly to individuals over time. The researchers found self-handicappers reported a loss in competence satisfaction, which mediated a relationship between self-handicapping and a negative mood. Across four studies, Zuckerman and Tsai discovered there are several negative consequences for self-handicappers; overall, they scored lower on measures of health and well-being, higher on negative mood and symptoms, and lower on intrinsic motivation. Self-handicapping typically makes a bad situation worse as individuals discount responsibility for their failures or poor performances. Thus, if individuals rationalize their lack of in-class involvement with such reasons as shyness or nervousness they may be setting themselves up for future academic failure.

Some students did indicate they were involved in the college classroom but they did not offer any indication they were actively involved. Astin (1999) argued involvement was a behavioral construct, and offered a list of active terms that reflected his notion of student involvement. Astin believed how the students behave is part of the involvement definition. Moreover, following Astin’s idea that involvement occurs on a continuum, students’ reports of involvement did range from passive involvement to active involvement. From the students’ perspective in-class involvement can include arriving on time for class to participating in small group discussions. However, passive involvement counters Cutler’s (2007) idea of involvement. For Cutler and the many college-level instructors who responded to her editorial (NSTA, 2007) passive involvement is just not enough. There may be a disconnection between student’s expectations for in-class involvement and their instructors’ expectations. One student wrote, “They never teach you to be involved in class at any lower level of education. Then, when you get to college teachers want feedback and discussion, [which] is not part of people’s normal classroom behavior.” Instructors may need to communicate more clearly what involvement means and how students need to be engaged in the classroom. Moreover, it is also essential for faculty and students to realize involvement and noninvolvement are separate dimensions and not
two ends of one continuum. As Astin (1999) indicated, involvement is a continuum, ranging from passive to active. Even if students are passively involved they are at least still engaged in the classroom (e.g., listening). Students who are noninvolved are disengaged. This disengagement includes not attending class or reading a newspaper in class and not listening to the instructor or other students.

Fortunately, many students did report being actively involved in the college classroom. Students’ active involvement descriptions ranged from occasionally asking questions or offering answers to frequently being engaged in class discussions. Moreover, they offered a variety of reasons for their active involvement. One student stated, “I believe I am involved. Being a senior, I am comfortable with college; I will speak up, answer questions because I know it makes the process smoother for myself, the professor, and the class.” Another student offered, “Really depends on the class, number of students, and teaching style. But yes, when interaction takes place I’m involved.” Students who were involved seem to realize that involvement was essential to their academic success. They reported that when they were involved in class, they performed successfully on tests and earned better grades. A student wrote, “I know it’s a great chance to be in college and I want to take advantage of it. I want to learn as much as I can, so I try to be involved.” These positive learning outcomes coincide with Tinto’s (1997) argument that the greater involvement in college life, the greater the acquisition of knowledge and development of skills.

**Discussing Frames of Involvement**

Frames are the organization of individual’s experiences in life (Goffman, 1974). The experience that someone has had informs his/her frames. These frames will then inform the individual on how to behave when he/she experiences a specific situation. Frames, in this study, do little to provide solid understanding of student’s specific behaviors. However, examining the results of this study in terms of frames provides opportunities for further critical thought and research through stimulating theorizing student’s behaviors, which often raises further questions for future research.

First, thinking about involvement as a behavior moderated through individual’s frames promotes a degree of reflexivity. That is, do teacher and student frames align? Because experiences in life dictate how people react in situations, it is likely that the frames of teachers and students are different. This would mean that the expectations that the instructor has might not be able to be met because the student’s expectations are so different. Questioning the alignment of frames between teacher and student becomes critical when investigating expectations. If teacher expectations hinge upon a frame that is vastly different or in opposition from students, then teacher expectations will not be met.

Frames rely on involvement and participation within the frame when it is called upon, but this doesn’t mean that students are told to participate in a situation by talking, asking questions, doing homework, etc. What it means is that there are expectations for a certain performance. If
the frame of the classroom calls for the student to sit quietly and do nothing, then he/she is involved and participating (in his/her frame) when the/she is doing nothing in the eyes of the teacher. This calls for an increased awareness from teachers about students’ expectations of the class. But the expectations of the student, as students convey them, might still not be his/her role in the classroom. This possibility can be seen when comparing the responses that students gave concerning their perceptions of other students.

While some students labeled participation in the classroom the way that a teacher might, others labeled their passive behaviors as participation. This example alone provides a minimum of three frames. If students are in stark contrast with what qualifies as their participation in class, then this evidences the existence of multiple frames. If the issues of participation in class were nonexistent, then one might assume that teachers and students are operating using the same frame. But this is unlikely because frames are constructed through individual experience. It is likely for frames to differ minimally. In fact, Goffman (1974) says that some variance is allowed and usually present, but it is tolerated. Variances between students in frames is generally tolerated while the variance between teacher and student frames are less tolerated. The current study represents that.

The size of the classroom and numbers of students in the class was identified as a point of disagreement. It stands to reason that individuals are more likely to prefer smaller class sizes, as this is what colleges and universities advertise, when present, as good. It is unlikely that a college or university will advertise large class sizes of 200 people. The connotation of this is bad. However, if the connotation were good, then colleges and universities would likely advertise this and students’ frames would reflect this. Frames might account for those who prefer large class sizes by citing what Goffman (1974) called “negative experience” (p. 378). A negative experience, such as suffering a humiliation in a class, might be enough to cause a frame change to enjoy larger classes where they might not be noticed. But what about classes where participation is good?

While frames may inform involvement in the frame as manifesting in non-class participation, the frame likely also recognizes that the teacher has power that should be respected at a varying degree. Thus, even if a student’s frame is one with little participation in class, the student’s frame might still tell them that the teacher has power in the classroom and he/she should do as told. This could account for students saying that their participation was dependent on the teacher’s style and whether or not it is encouraged. Student frames might have a provision for involvement being lack of in-class participation until the teacher tells them that they have to. The frame says no class participation, but it also says the teacher can make me do things that he/she chooses. Frames provide many theoretical explanations for the way students behave in the classroom situation and offers insight as to why teachers perceive involvement or non-involvement on the part of students.
Conclusions

The findings from the student responses are rich in many ways. Students who perceive that they participate in the classroom might be perceived by others as not participating. Participants also indicated that they would participate if the environment was correct or the teacher made them. It is important to take away the differences in perception between teachers and even fellow students. Increasing classroom involvement might be as simple as telling students to be more involved. However, it might also be much more complicated. If the primary frame for navigating the situation of the college classroom calls for involvement in the frame by not participating in class, then this risks becoming the dominant culture (if this has not already happened). This is important to note because students far outnumber faculty. For this reason, it is paramount for teachers to understand the most about student frames to adapt.

The main limitation of this research is the make-up of the sample. Using all students in introductory courses provides a wide range of participants. Including upper level classes with communication majors runs the risk of including people who will differ from the non-major student because of a better understanding of communication. Therefore, future research should focus on a population with no particular areas to cause strong discrepancy, a sample of students that is more similar to each other in demographic makeup. Additionally, more research might decidedly work to identify present frames of classroom participation of both teachers and students. Future research might determine the connection of differing frames, if identified, and be used to bridge frames for further agreement. For example, online support platforms may enhance student involvement and participation. E-mail is a common method students and instructors use to communicate with one another, and social network sites, such as Facebook also allow students to continuously communicate with their instructors. Facebook is highly interactive and much different than other forms of mediated communication instructors may use to communicate with students (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). Ultimately, to enhance the classroom experience for everyone, notions of involvement for instructors and students need to align.

References


Appendix

Table 1

Definition of Variables and Sample Items for In-Class Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sample items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Involvement</td>
<td>Relevant in-class verbal engagement between instructor and student(s), and among students.</td>
<td>offering opinions, discussions in small groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive Involvement</td>
<td>Attentive in-class involvement in lieu of verbal engagement.</td>
<td>head nods, completing assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Factors</td>
<td>The role the instructor plays in encouraging student in-class involvement.</td>
<td>calls on students, is open and caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Factors</td>
<td>Who the student is, as well as, how the student compares himself or herself to others in the classroom.</td>
<td>student rank, “I do it more than others”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Type &amp; Structure</td>
<td>Perceptions of the course including enrollment, content, and grading policies.</td>
<td>related to major, smaller class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes of Involvement</td>
<td>The positive benefits for student in-class involvement.</td>
<td>enhances own learning, helps others and their learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2

**Definition of Variables and Sample Items for In-Class Noninvolvement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sample items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Passivity</td>
<td>Passive engagement, no verbal involvement.</td>
<td>just take notes, prefers to only listen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Factors</td>
<td>How the instructor deters in-class engagement or student expectations of the instructor.</td>
<td>instructor just lectures, “I just want the instructor to talk”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Factors ~ Self</td>
<td>Who the student is or how students perceive the classroom experience.</td>
<td>hate the spotlight, don’t want to be in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Factors ~ Others</td>
<td>How others in the class impact student in-class involvement.</td>
<td>peer influence to be quiet, rely on others to talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives to Involvement</td>
<td>What students do other than engage themselves in the classroom experience.</td>
<td>text-message, don’t prepare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Type &amp; Structure</td>
<td>How the course itself deters student in-class involvement.</td>
<td>class is a requirement, class is too large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Perceived Benefit</td>
<td>No incentive for in-class involvement.</td>
<td>it’s not important, it is of no value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Negative Repercussions</td>
<td>The outcome of involvement may be too risky or it may harm the self-concept of the student.</td>
<td>fear of being wrong, don’t want to be judged by others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

-------------

**Author’s Note**

Inquiries concerning this manuscript should be made to the first author at sideling@oakland.edu, 316 Wilson Hall, Rochester, MI, 48309-4401, (telephone) 248-370-4126, (fax) 248-370-4208, sideling@oakland.edu
Broken Up but Not Broken: Satisfaction, Adjustment, and Communication in Post-Dissolutional Relationships

Stephanie Villella
Undergraduate Student
savillel@cord.edu
Communication Studies and Theatre Art Department
Concordia College
Moorhead, MN

ABSTRACT
The aim of this study was to examine adjustment, satisfaction, and the frequency of communication that occurs between ex-partners in post-dissolutional relationships. Participants (N = 239) were surveyed on their levels of satisfaction, adjustment to the break-up and communication with their most recent ex-romantic partner as a means to explore the process of redefining romantic relationships into platonic friendships. Results demonstrated that who initiated the break-up influenced levels of satisfaction and adjustment. Adjustment and frequency of communication were affected by whether ex-partners had moved on to a new romantic relationship. Differences were also observed between how males and females adjusted to break-ups. Though not predicted, additional results also showed that whether ex-partners remained friends with one another had an impact on post-dissolutional satisfaction and the frequency of communication.

While interpersonal research focusing on relationships has historically focused on the variety of stages that occur during a romantic relationship, more recent research has started to address the events that follow the end of a romantic relationship. More specifically, research on dissolved relationships has centered attention on the phases that follow relationship dissolution, which often result in redefining romantic relationships into platonic friendships.

Much of the research that focuses on post-dissolutional stages sees relationship dissolution as a sometimes predictable cycle (Battaglia, Richard, Datteri, & Lord, 1998). Much like prior research has identified schemas for first dates, similar patterns have been observed in post-dissolutional relationships. Baxter (1984) identified seven specific stages that occur in the process of relational dissolution (the onset of problems, decision to end the relationship, initiation of dissolution by one partner, reaction from the other partner, partner agreement on dissolution, and more repair attempts or final dissolution of the relationship.) However, rather than claiming post-dissolutional relationships follow a consistent script, Baxter’s study determined that there are differences in the disengagement process from situation to situation. The most common pattern occurring after a break-up has been found to be a relational decline, though there are several different trajectory types each relationship may follow (Kellas, Bean,
Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008). Battaglia et al. (1998) found that relationship dissolution begins with one partner losing interest, followed by a discussion of the dissatisfaction in the relationship. Usually, before the actual breaking up process begins, the partners begin to detach themselves emotionally to improve their adjustment abilities in the future, before finally resulting in the termination of the romantic relationship. Though this process may not always follow the same steps, this gradual detachment is noticed frequently in the average script for relationship termination (Battaglia et al., 1998).

The concept of waning interest and detachment that typically occurs before relationship termination is quite common. However, this detachment can display itself in a variety of forms with varying characteristics. Felmlee (2001) explored an idea similar to Battaglia’s, which is that relationships go through stages of disenchantment. This disenchantment occurs when the infatuation that partners may have previously experienced with a certain personality trait of their significant other lessens or when the partners become less satisfied with the specific trait. This de-infatuation causes discontentment in the relationship. After the disenchantment process occurs, the partners often begin to evaluate one another negatively, which can affect the relationship that results after the romantic connection has been terminated (Felmlee, 2001).

VanderDrift, Agnew, and Wilson (2009) also explored this process, finding that, in addition to the de-infatuation identified by Felmlee, the level of commitment in a relationship affects the leave behaviors. This led to identification of a stage in between experiencing low commitment and termination of the relationship, which VanderDrift et al. (2009) labeled consideration of dissolution. Once this stage occurs, whether as a result of low commitment or dissatisfaction with certain partner traits, the process of relationship termination usually follows shortly after (Felmlee, 2001; VanderDrift et al., 2009).

Since several studies have determined processes and cycles by which romantic relationships dissolve without addressing the stages and cycles that occur in the redefinition process, it is important to address this issue. It has been stated that relationship dissolution does not follow a defined script in which the stages are the same for each person. Foley and Fraser (1998) made this evident in a study discussing relationship dissolution as a process of redefining the romantic relationship, rather than simply complete termination of all relational ties. Foley and Fraser found that, similar to previous research, those who had more emotional involvement before the dissolution were more likely to redefine their relationship as a friendship. They also identified that this transition from romantic territory to the “just friends” category is often uncomfortable due to the lack of a schematic script that can be used for these situations (Foley & Fraser, 1998).

As with Foley and Fraser’s (1998) research predicting the factors that would help to ease the transition into friendship territory, other studies have explored the probability of continuing relational ties after romantic dissolution using the framework of the social exchange theory. Social exchange theory was derived from the idea that, in relationships, people seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs. Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin (1990) used this framework to determine factors that may contribute to the pace at which a relationship would dissolve. The
factors they found included an evaluation of the potential for alternative partners, the frequency
of contact, and the length of the relationship, among others. Social exchange theory helped to
predict the probability of whether a relationship was likely to result in disengagement (Felmlee et
al., 1990).

Just as the social exchange theory can aid in determining the likelihood of relational
dissolution, it can be extended to relationship definitions beyond the break-up. In Busboom,
Collins, Givertz, and Levin’s (2002) study, the social exchange framework was used to predict
the likelihood of the romantic relationship being redefined to a platonic friendship. The study
found that resources, which are seen as benefits, and barriers, seen as costs, affected relational
satisfaction and the extent to which the dissolved relationship would be redefined. Busboom et
al. (2002) found that a higher frequency of and more satisfaction with resources received from
the partner would increase the chances that a friendship would result after the romantic
relationship had been terminated.

Schneider and Kenny (2000) also used the idea of comparing costs and benefits to weigh
potential satisfaction by examining the differences in relationships between cross-sex friends
who had once been romantically involved and cross-sex friends who had no history of romantic
involvement. In addition to costs and benefits, the rules of friendship, romantic desires, and
friendship quality were also measured. The results showed that more positive reactions and more
benefits were reported in friends who had never experienced romantic involvement, while more
negative responses and more costs were reported among ex partners (Schneider & Kenny, 2000).
By analyzing the costs and benefits through a social exchange perspective, it was possible to
predict specific characteristics of ex-partners after their relationships had dissolved. In this study,
the key characteristics that became the focus of attention were satisfaction, adjustment, and
frequency of communication. To further analyze these categories, the current study concentrated
on the effects of sex, initiation of the break-up, and current relationship status on these three
areas.

**Post-Dissolution Relational Satisfaction**

Given that frequency and quality of benefits received in relationships are determining
factors for whether ex-partners are likely to stay friends after romantic dissolution, it is necessary
to examine satisfaction in post-dissolutional relationships and the factors that influence it. In a
2002 study, Lannutti and Cameron researched factors contributing to satisfaction in post-break-
up relationships, arguing that satisfaction is essential to study in terminated relationships since
dissatisfaction is usually a major cause of dissolution. For their study, they defined satisfaction
as “the degree to which the ex partners feel positively about the post-dissolutional relationship”
(Lannutti & Cameron, 2002, 156). They found that satisfaction was ultimately affected by the
length of the romantic relationship before it ended, the extent to which partners hoped to renew
their relationship, the amount of time since the break-up, and the amount of liking the exes had
for one another (Lannutti & Cameron, 2002). The finding that partners who hoped to renew the
romantic relationship were less satisfied with their friendship led to the proposed hypothesis of the current study. By inferring that people who are currently involved in (new) romantic relationships will have less hope to renew the romantic relationship with their ex, the current study predicts that this factor would influence satisfaction:

**Hypothesis 1:** Those who are currently involved in a romantic relationship will be more satisfied with the quality of the platonic friendship with their ex-romantic partner than those who are not in a romantic relationship.

Levels of satisfaction with a relationship depend on multiple factors. By knowing the factors that influence satisfaction, it becomes easier to predict how relational satisfaction will change when significant changes occur in a relationship. LeBel and Campbell’s (2009) study related satisfaction to the amount of spontaneous feelings experienced by ex-partners about their past relationship. People who reported more positive feelings about the past relationship were perceived to be more satisfied in their current relationship. It was also predicted and revealed that these people would have a greater chance at maintaining a successful friendship with their exes (LeBel & Campbell, 2009).

Part of this satisfaction is determined by the level of agreement ex-partners have about their relationship. In Sprecher, Schmeckle, and Felmlee’s (2006) study, it was predicted that partners who were not equally emotionally involved would experience less satisfaction in comparison to relationships where both partners reported equal emotional involvement. The study received support for their prediction, finding that unequal emotional involvement was also related to negative emotions and lower levels of satisfaction in the relationship after the dissolution. Additionally, people who reflected back on their relationships and viewed themselves as being more emotionally involved than their partners experienced less satisfaction and higher levels of distress after the relationship had ended (Sprecher et al., 2006). Since romantic relationships are generally terminated by those who feel less emotionally involved in their relationships (Sprecher et al., 2006) and since those who feel more emotionally involved have generally been found to be less satisfied, a hypothesis was formed for the current study based on this knowledge:

**Hypothesis 2:** Non-initiators of break-ups will be less satisfied with the current relationship with their ex-romantic partner than initiators of break-ups.

In addition to relationship agreement leading to higher satisfaction, Baxter and Pittman (2001) found that couple satisfaction was also associated with ex-partners’ agreement of turning points recognized in their relationship. If both partners reminisced about the same aspects of their relationship and held the same attitudes about these recalled events or stages, they were found to be more satisfied with their relationship overall. However, if one partner reflected more positively on the relationship than another partner, there would not be the same balance of
feelings about the relationship, resulting in less overall satisfaction in the friendship that resulted after the romantic disengagement (Baxter & Pittman, 2001).

As with Baxter and Pittman’s (2001) research involving turning points as a predictor of relational satisfaction, other studies have determined specific trajectory patterns that result in higher or lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Johnson et al. (2004) examined turning points in both friendships and dissolved romantic relationships to determine how the turning points affected friendship quality. While inspecting their results, they observed gender differences and noted that females reported more turning points dealing with conflict in their friendships than males did, which may have implications for satisfaction (Johnson et al., 2004). A different study conducted by Fitzpatrick and Sollie (1999) discovered a significant dissimilarity between males and females in terms of satisfaction. The study found that, in comparison to males, females were more committed to their relationships and thus more invested in them than men. The idea that females are more invested in relationships implies that they would be more likely to have stronger negative feelings after the relationship has dissolved (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999). This reasoning, as well as the findings of Johnson et al. (2004) contributed to the third hypothesis in the current study:

**Hypothesis 3: Females will be less satisfied with the current relationship with their ex-romantic partner than males.**

In Johnson et al.’s (2004) study, attention was paid to the trajectory types and patterns of deteriorated relationships. Results showed that most ex-partners reported having a linear relational pattern, though some were marked by a downward turn followed by recovery, which led to higher levels of closeness and satisfaction in the relationship (Johnson et al., 2004). Similarly, Kellas et al. (2008) found that people who experienced an upward progression after their relationships had dissolved were more satisfied with the quality of their post-dissolutional relationships than those who reported any other type of trajectory pattern, such as a linear or declining pattern. The type of trajectory pattern that was experienced in the post-dissolutional relationships was also seen to be a predictor of how well both parties would adjust to the romantic dissolution.

**Post-Dissolution Adjustment**

Adjustment is an important aspect to consider when studying platonic friendships that develop after relationship termination as it is interrelated with satisfaction and may determine the quality of friendship that develops. It is also an integral step in redefining post-dissolutional relationships. Being that break-ups are considered negative events, most people need to proceed through levels of coping after their romantic relationships dissolve. McCarthy, Lambert, and Brack (1997) set out to determine whether coping resources would determine reactions to break-ups. They found that where more coping resources were used, there were greater levels of
positive affect, and where fewer coping resources were used, there were greater levels of negative affect. The study also determined that “combative coping strategies” such as self-disclosure and social support often helped to lessen negative feelings pertaining to break-ups, aiding in adjustment (McCarthy et al., 1997, 60).

Since coping is such a significant part of the relationship redefinition process, several other studies have examined the factors contributing to or hindering this emotional recovery in post-break-up relationships. In one study, Sbarra (2006) predicted that people who initiated break-ups would recover more easily over time. The study found that, while attachment, love for one’s ex, and anger about the break-up were predictors of less adjustment, who initiated relationship termination was not a significant influence over the extent of recovery. However, because it is predicted that initiators of break-ups are likely to be less attached, they would be likely to have an easier time adjusting to the disengagement, so the current researchers set out to re-examine Sbarra’s finding.

Hypothesis 4: Non-initiators of break-ups will be less adjusted to the break-up than those who initiated the relationship termination.

When analyzing adjustment, just as with satisfaction, it is important to recognize the key factors that contribute to adjustment after significant changes are made in a relationship. In addition, it is equally essential to recognize those factors that stand in the way of adjustment to these changes. A study conducted by Busboom et al. (2002) found that several barriers can stand in the way of forming post-dissolution friendships. Some of these barriers included a lack of support from family or friends, involvement in a new relationship, and the amount of conflict that was experienced in the romantic relationship (Busboom et al., 2002). Sbarra and Emery (2005) discovered similar findings by having study participants record a diary of emotions when indicated by a beeper during a 28 day period. They found that the most negative emotions occurred immediately after participants’ break-ups and that those who continued to be in contact with their ex-partners did not stop loving them or overcoming sadness as quickly as those who had no contact with their ex-partners (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). The results of these two studies (Busboom et al., 2002; Sbarra & Emery, 2005), were combined to draw further inferences. Since involvement in a new relationship is a barrier that stands in the way of forming post-dissolutional friendships, and having no friendship or contact with an ex-partner results in easier adjustment, the previous research was combined to predict the following in the current study:

Hypothesis 5: Those who are currently involved in a romantic relationship will be more adjusted to the break-up than those who are not currently involved in a romantic relationship.

A study by Choo, Levine, and Hatfield (1996) determined that gender is an additional factor that can significantly influence adjustment. The study found that men and women utilized
different coping strategies when attempting to recover from a break-up. Women more frequently blamed their ex-partners as a coping strategy, while men were more likely to keep their minds occupied with other activities (Choo et al., 1996). In keeping with research on gender and adjustment, Davis, Shaver, and Vernon (2003) found that women were usually more emotionally involved in their romantic relationships prior to dissolution than men. Keeping in mind that those who viewed themselves as being more emotionally involved during the romantic relationship often had a more difficult time adjusting, another hypothesis was formed for the current study:

**Hypothesis 6: Females will be less adjusted to break-ups than males.**

The factors that influence post-dissolutional adjustment are necessary to identify since relationships often change dramatically after romantic dissolution. By viewing adjustment as a cycle, similar to that of the actual relationship development process, it becomes evident that relationship adjustment is a series of phases as opposed to one concrete event. For this reason, it is important to observe the impact of the emotional disruption experienced in the post-dissolutional stages of a relationship on the frequency of communication between ex-partners.

**Frequency of Communication**

Much research conducted on post-dissolutional relationships has evaluated the romantic relationship as a process ending in relationship termination, implying that once a romantic relationship dissolves, no relationship remains. However, as the current study emphasizes, more recent research on the subject has recognized relationship disengagement as a process of redefining a relationship. Communication does not always stop once romantic ties have been severed.

Lannutti and Cameron (2002) found several factors that influence the amount of communication in post-dissolutional relationships. They determined that the amount of time that elapses after the break-up significantly predicts the amount of contact between ex-partners (Lannutti & Cameron, 2002).

With this finding, the researchers discovered that, as time passes, ex-partners contact one another less. However, they recognized that factors such as a person’s social network, previously held beliefs about break-ups or relational norms, hope for a renewal of the romantic relationship, and the level of liking for the ex-partner all influenced the frequency of communication. Focusing on Lannutti and Cameron’s (2002) finding that ex-partners who hope to renew the romantic relationship would attempt to communicate with their exes more frequently, two other variables were taken into consideration for the current study. Based on previous research, the current study predicted that those who were involved in a new romantic relationship and those who initiated their break-up would be less likely to hope for romantic renewal of their relationship than those who were not in a new relationship or did not initiate their break-up. These inferences led to two of the current study’s hypotheses:
Hypothesis 7: Those who are currently involved in a romantic relationship will attempt to communicate with their ex-partners less frequently than those who are not currently involved in a romantic relationship.

Hypothesis 8: Non-initiators of the relationship termination will attempt to communicate with break-up initiators more than initiators will attempt to communicate with non-initiators.

Those who have moved on to a new partner, as well as those who initiate a break-up are likely to be people that consider themselves less attached in the relationship. So, when one person feels significantly less attached than the other, it is likely that the less attached partner will communicate less frequently. Previously mentioned research conducted by Davis et al. (2003) discussed attachment styles and reactions to relationship dissolution when theorizing about adjustment. A major coping strategy discovered was avoidance, which could be seen as preventing communication or decreasing the initiation of communication. Results showed that those who were more emotionally involved or attached in their relationship were less likely to avoid their ex-partners. However, since the study also found that women were likely to be more emotionally involved in their relationships, a hypothesis was proposed in the current study stating what this may mean in terms of differences in avoiding or initiating communication between males and females:

Hypothesis 9: Females will attempt to communicate with their ex-romantic partner more often than males.

Method

Participants

A total of 239 undergraduate students, 84 males and 155 females, from a small Midwestern private college participated in this study. The participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 29 years with a mean age of 20.3 years. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants were notified before completion of the survey that there was potential for emotional discomfort. Surveys were distributed in classes from the departments of Communication (68.2%), Chemistry (18.0%), Business (7.5%) and Spanish (5.4%). In addition, 2 students (.8%) were given surveys in the library. In two of the Communication classes, participants were compensated with a small amount of extra credit offered by their professors. No additional compensation was provided.
Procedure

Participants completed a multi-page self-administered survey questionnaire. On the first page of the survey, participants were asked to report demographic information, including whether they had ever experienced a romantic break-up. Of the 239 participants, 32 (13.4%) of the participants responded that they had never experienced a break-up. The participants that had never experienced a break-up were given instructions to turn in their survey at that time.

Of the remaining 207 participants that reported that they had experienced a break-up, 194 (93.7%) people responded that their most recent break-up had occurred at least a month earlier and 12 (5.8%) responded that their most recent relationship ended less than one month ago.

The 194 participants were instructed to continue the survey while the 12 were instructed not to continue. However, 6 of the 12 continued the survey despite these instructions creating a sample of 200 participants who completed the entire survey. The data from the 6 participants was kept in the study because it was determined that whether the break-up occurred more than one month ago did not significantly impact the responses. The reason the instructions originally advised participants to turn in their survey if their break-up had occurred less than one month ago was solely to decrease the possibility of emotional discomfort and sensitivity.

Measures

In addition to the demographic questions, the survey included two previously established measures to assess satisfaction and adjustment. Satisfaction was measured using five of the six items in the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI) created by Robert Norton (1983). Because the items in Norton’s QMI discussed satisfaction in a martial relationship, these items were adapted by the current study to pertain to nonmartial relationships (“We have a good relationship,” “My relationship with my ex partner is very stable,” “Our relationship is strong,” “My relationship with my ex partner makes me happy,” and “Taking all things together, how would you describe your relationship?”). The one item that was not used (“I really feel like part of a team with my partner”) was omitted as it did not directly relate to dissolved relationships. The measure used a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree,”) except for the final item, which ranged from 1 (“very unhappy”) to 7 (“very happy.”) Reliability for this measure of satisfaction was high ($\alpha = .90$).

Adjustment was measured with a scale developed by Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, and Cheng (2008). The measure used a 7-point Likert-type scale with six items measuring two separate categories. Three of the items measured emotional disruption due to the break-up. The other three items measured current adjustment to the relationship dissolution. Reliability of the two components of adjustment was determined using the Cronbach’s alpha reliability test (emotional disruption, $\alpha = .75$ and current adjustment, $\alpha = .78$).

Finally, to determine frequency of communication, participants were asked two separate questions about their level of contact with their ex-partner. The first of these questions asked
“How frequently do you communicate with your ex?” (“Every day,” “2-7 times per week,” “Every other week,” “Once a month,” “Less than once a month,” and “I do not communicate with my ex.”) Participants were also asked to report “When you communicate with your ex, who initiates conversation more frequently?” (“Me,” “My ex,” “We both initiate conversation equally,” or “I do not communicate with my ex.”)

Results

Satisfaction

To analyze post-dissolution satisfaction, a 2 (sex) x 2 (new romantic partner) x 2 (initiator of break-up) x 2 (current friendship with ex) ANOVA was performed. Whether the ex-partners were still friends was added as an additional factor because we realized it could possibly influence satisfaction in the relationship. Current friendship with an ex was the only factor that was found to be significant in this ANOVA. Results showed that current friendship with the ex did influence satisfaction, $F(1, 182) = 96.10, p < .001$. As one might expect, people who remained friends with their exes reported higher satisfaction with their current relationship ($m = 4.32$) than those who did not remain friends with their exes ($m = 2.37$).

In this ANOVA, two factors were found to have no real significance in predicting satisfaction: Sex was found to be a non-significant factor in determining satisfaction, providing no support for Hypothesis 3, $F(1, 182) = .00, p > .05$. In addition, whether an ex-partner was involved in a new romantic relationship was also a non-significant factor in determining satisfaction, providing no support for Hypothesis 1, $F(1, 182) = .17, p > .05$.

Since some of the factors seemed to cloud the results, a reduced model was created by dropping the factors which resulted in $F$-values below 1.00 (Buller, Burgoon, White, & Ebesu, 1994), resulting in a 2 (initiator of break-up) x 2 (current friendship with ex) ANOVA. In this ANOVA, whether a person had initiated the break-up was a significant factor related to satisfaction, which supported Hypothesis 2, $F(1, 190) = 5.14, p < .03$ (one-tailed hypothesis). Those who had initiated the break-up were found to be more satisfied with their post-dissolutional relationship ($m = 3.70$) than those who did not initiate the break-up ($m = 3.46$).

Adjustment

Adjustment was broken up into two components, adapted from Kellas et al. (2008), which included emotional disruption and current adjustment. These two components were found to have a Pearson correlation of $r = .47, p < .001$, meaning that the more emotionally disrupted by the break-up a participant was, the less well adjusted he/she currently felt (high scores on the current adjustment scale indicated a lack of current adjustment). To analyze overall post-dissolution adjustment, a MANOVA was conducted with the dependent variables current adjustment and emotional disruption and the independent variables of sex, involvement in a new
romantic relationship, who initiated the break-up, and whether the ex-partners were still friends. While there were no hypotheses concerning current friendship with an ex, this variable was included to see if it would have an effect on adjustment.

Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6 were created to determine which factors would contribute to adjustment capabilities in post-dissolutional relationships. To identify levels of emotional disruption and current adjustment, a 2 (sex) x 2 (new romantic partner) x 2 (initiator of break-up) x 2 (current friendship with ex) MANOVA was performed. Since current friendship was found to be a non-significant factor affecting adjustment, multivariate $F(2, 183) = .43, p > .05$, this variable was taken out of the data and a new 2 (sex) x 2 (new romantic partner) x 2 (initiator of break-up) MANOVA was performed. In this new reduced-model MANOVA, some support was found for each of the remaining hypotheses.

The prediction in Hypothesis 4 that people who did not initiate relationship dissolution would experience less adjustment to the break-up than those who initiated relationship termination was supported, multivariate $F(2, 189) = 8.15, p < .001$, with a significant univariate effect on emotional disruption, $F(1, 190) = 13.50, p < .001$. Participants who did not initiate the break-up were found to be more emotionally disrupted ($m = 3.96$) by the dissolution than those who initiated the break-up ($m = 3.17$). While the initiator aspect did influence emotional disruption, it did not result in a significant univariate effect for current adjustment, $F(1, 190) = .096, p > .05$.

Hypothesis 5, which stated that those currently involved in a romantic relationship would be more adjusted to the break-up than those not currently involved in a romantic relationship, also received support, multivariate $F(2, 189) = 14.80, p < .001$. Results showed no significant univariate effect for emotional disruption, $F(1, 190) = 2.20, p > .05$. However, existence of a new romantic relationship revealed a significant univariate effect on current adjustment, $F(1, 190) = 28.15, p < .001$. Those who were not currently in a relationship were less adjusted ($m = 2.39$) than those who were in a current relationship ($m = 1.51$). (Lower scores represent higher levels of adjustment.)

Hypothesis 6, which stated that females would be less adjusted to the break-up than males, was partially supported. Taken as a whole, sex was seen to be a significant factor in determining adjustment, multivariate $F(2, 189) = 4.49, p = .012$. Even though sex did not have a significant univariate effect on emotional disruption, $F(1, 190) = 2.52, p > .05$, or a significant univariate effect on current adjustment, $F(1, 190) = 2.11, p > .05$, the multivariate effect showed a significant difference between the adjustment of males and females. Females were found to be more disrupted at the time of the break-up ($m = 3.64$) than males ($m = 3.25$). However, females also showed more current adjustment ($m = 1.84$) than males ($m = 2.13$). (Lower scores represent higher levels of adjustment.)
Frequency of Communication

To determine the overall frequency of communication between exes, a chi-square test was conducted to see if there were significant differences in the frequency of communication between those who were currently involved in a romantic relationship \( (n = 102, 51.0\%) \) and those who were not \( (n = 98, 49.0\%) \). The chi-square method was used due to its effectiveness in comparing unequal categorical groups, such as those involved with the variable of current relationship involvement. In this test, a significant effect was revealed, supporting Hypothesis 7, \( \chi^2 (5, N = 200) = 18.76, p < .002 \).

The results of this chi-square analysis demonstrated a pattern, which reflected that those who were not currently in a romantic relationship were more likely to communicate with their exes at least once a month, while those who were in a current romantic relationship were more likely to communicate with their ex-partners less than once a month or not at all. Table 1 shows the specific patterns in communication frequencies between those who were involved in a romantic relationship and those who were not involved in a romantic relationship.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Communication</th>
<th>Involved in a current romantic relationship ( n = 102 )</th>
<th>Not involved in a current romantic relationship ( n = 98 )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>4 (3.9%)</td>
<td>5 (5.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-7 times per week</td>
<td>8 (7.8%)</td>
<td>9 (9.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every other week</td>
<td>6 (5.9%)</td>
<td>19 (19.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td>11 (10.8%)</td>
<td>22 (22.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once a month</td>
<td>29 (28.4%)</td>
<td>20 (20.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>44 (43.1%)</td>
<td>23 (23.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>102 (100.0%)</td>
<td>98 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Post hoc chi-square analysis also revealed significant differences in the frequency of communication between those who remained friends with their exes and those who did not, \( \chi^2 (5, N = 198) = 108.21, p < .001 \). The pattern discovered in these results demonstrated that those who remained friends with their exes were significantly more likely to communicate with their ex-partners at least once a month. None of the respondents who reported that they were no longer
friends with their exes communicated with their ex-partners more frequently than once a month. In fact, a large portion of those that did not remain friends with their ex-partners reported having no communication with their exes at all. More specific results are given in Table 2, which details the comparisons of the frequency of communication between those that did not remain friends with their exes and those that did.

Table 2

Current Friendship and Frequency of Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Communication</th>
<th>Still friends with ex</th>
<th>Not still friends with ex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>9 (7.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-7 times per week</td>
<td>17 (13.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every other week</td>
<td>25 (20.2%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td>28 (22.6%)</td>
<td>5 (6.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once a month</td>
<td>36 (29.0%)</td>
<td>12 (16.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>9 (7.3%)</td>
<td>57 (77.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>124 (100.0%)</td>
<td>74 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hypothesis 8, which predicted that non-initiators would attempt to communicate with their exes more frequently than those who initiated the break-up, was not supported, \( \chi^2 (10, N = 200) = 11.52, p > .05 \). There was also no support found for Hypothesis 9, which predicted that females would try to communicate with their ex-romantic partner more often than males, \( \chi^2 (5, N = 200) = 6.37, p > .05 \).

Post Hoc Analyses of Communication Initiation

In addition to analyzing the frequency of communication among ex-partners, chi-square analyses were conducted to determine differences in who initiated communication after the relationship was terminated. Similar to the results found with frequency of communication, significant effects were discovered amongst those who were currently in a romantic relationship and those who were not, \( \chi^2 (3, N = 200) = 13.22, p < .004 \). For those currently involved in a romantic relationship, communication was initiated less by both parties and more participants responded that they did not communicate with their ex-partners at all. Conversely, for those who
reported not being involved in a new romantic relationship, more communication was initiated by both parties and fewer respondents reported that they did not communicate with their exes. Table 3 shows more in-depth results of these patterns.

**Table 3**

**Involvement in Current Romantic Relationship and Initiation of Communication**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who Initiates Communication</th>
<th>Involved in a current romantic relationship</th>
<th>Not involved in a current romantic relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>5 (4.9%)</td>
<td>14 (14.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My ex</td>
<td>19 (18.6%)</td>
<td>21 (21.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both initiate conversation equally</td>
<td>38 (37.3%)</td>
<td>45 (45.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not communicate with my ex</td>
<td>40 (39.2%)</td>
<td>18 (18.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>102 (100.0%)</strong></td>
<td><strong>98 (100.0%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A significant effect was also found between whether ex-partners remained friends and who initiated post-break-up communication, $\chi^2 (3, N = 198) = 90.01, p <.001$. As would be expected, those who reported that they remained friends with their exes after the relationship had dissolved also reported that communication was initiated by them or their partners more frequently than with those who did not stay friends with their exes. Not surprisingly, a significant portion of those that remained friends with their ex-partners reported that communication was initiated equally by both members of the dissolved romantic relationship. Those who reported that they had not remained friends with their ex reported much more frequently that there was no communication between them and their ex-partners. However, not all of the participants who responded that they had not remained friends with their exes reported that they did not initiate communication. A more in-depth analysis of these results is depicted in Table 4.

Though current involvement in a romantic relationship and current level of friendship with an ex both impacted patterns of who initiated communication, sex and who initiated the break-up were factors that did not significantly influence initiation of communication. No significant difference was demonstrated between communication initiation for males and females, $\chi^2 (3, N = 200) = 3.57, p >.05$. Who initiated the break-up was also found to be a non-significant factor pertaining to initiation of communication, $\chi^2 (6, N = 200) = 8.48, p >.05$. 

http://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/ctamj/vol37/iss1/11
Table 4

Current Friendship and Initiation of Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who Initiates Communication</th>
<th>Still friends with ex</th>
<th>Not still friends with ex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>13 (10.5%)</td>
<td>5 (6.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My ex</td>
<td>30 (24.2%)</td>
<td>10 (13.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both initiate conversation equally</td>
<td>74 (59.7%)</td>
<td>9 (12.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not communicate with my ex</td>
<td>7 (5.6%)</td>
<td>50 (67.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>124 (100.0%)</td>
<td>74 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Only recently has research on post-dissolutional relationships started to focus on the process of redefining romantic relationships into friendships as opposed to a complete termination of the relationship. Since many break-ups do not result in completely severed relational ties, this study recognizes the relationships that form after a romantic relationship has dissolved. Since romantic and platonic relationships both frame themselves in the social exchange theory, satisfaction plays an integral role in determining the success of redefined relationships. Those who consider their relationship to be highly rewarding and not very costly are likely to be more satisfied with their relationship, which increases the quality and probability of success for their post-dissolutional relationship (Busboom et al., 2002).

In this study, four separate variables, including participant sex, who initiated the break-up, involvement in a current relationship, and current friendship level, were tested to see which would have an impact on satisfaction within post-break-up relationships. A post-hoc result showed that those who were still friends with their exes experienced more satisfaction than those who were not still friends with their exes. Surprisingly, our first and third hypotheses, which dealt with involvement in a new romantic relationship and sex, were not found to impact levels of satisfaction. However, support was revealed for Hypothesis 2, which predicted that break-up initiators would experience greater levels of satisfaction than non-initiators.

Despite the lack of significant results for sex and current involvement in a relationship in the current study, previous research has discovered that several factors contribute to the redefinition of a romantic relationship into a friendship as opposed to complete termination. Metts, Cupach, and Bejlovec (1989) found that being friends before becoming romantically involved was a significant factor that predicted that a friendship may result after romantic relationship dissolution. Which strategies were used in the actual break-up process, such as
withdrawal or positive tone techniques, were also determined to affect the extent of friendship that would exist after the break-up (Metts et al., 1989). If the actual break-up affects the extent and quality of the friendship that occurs after the relationship has ended, it is not surprising that our first hypothesis was supported. Results of the current study showed that those who initiated the break-up reported more satisfaction in their post-dissolutional relationship than those who did not initiate the break-up.

In keeping with the theory that many romantic relationships are simply redefined into friendships after romantic dissolution occurs, the current study observed levels of adjustment to relationship disengagement. We found support for all of our hypotheses for adjustment. Hypothesis 4, which predicted that non-initiators of the break-up would be less adjusted than those who initiated the break-up, was partially supported. We found that those who were on the receiving end of the disengagement were more emotionally disrupted at the time of the break-up than those who initiated termination. Surprisingly, who initiated the break-up was not found to influence levels of current adjustment, suggesting that, after time has passed, non-initiators and initiators of dissolution have the same level of difficulty adjusting. This is consistent with Sbarra’s (2006) finding that who initiates relationship termination does not affect the extent of the recovery, however it is still important to recognize that this variable did influence emotional disruption at the time of the break-up.

Hypothesis 5, which predicted that current involvement in a romantic relationship would result in more adjustment, was also supported. While involvement in a romantic relationship did not affect emotional disruption, simply because emotional disruption was the measure of adjustment immediately after the break-up occurred, we did find that those who had moved on to be in a new romantic relationship were more well-adjusted than those who were still single. This result was consistent with studies showing that involvement in a new relationship acts as a barrier toward redefining romantic relationships into platonic friendships (Busboom et al., 2002). Thus, if individuals enter into new relationships after the dissolution occurs, the existence of a new romantic partner might serve as a barrier to the friendship because the ex-partners may have lost investment in their old relationship and begun to focus on their new partner or relationship.

As other studies (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999; Johnson et al., 2004) have made predictions on the effects of sex and post-dissolutional relationships, we thought it necessary to examine the differences between males and females in these redefined relationships. Previous research has determined that women are often more invested in and more committed to romantic relationships than men, thus it would be understandable for women to have a more difficult time adjusting to the dissolution of a relationship in which they have been more invested (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999). Hypothesis 6, which predicted that females would be less adjusted to break-ups than males, was partially supported, most likely for this reason. Our results showed that women were more emotionally disrupted by the break-up, meaning they initially had a more difficult time adjusting. Since women are more often the more committed partners in their relationships (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999), it was not surprising to find that they experienced more immediate emotional disruption than men in the current study. Surprisingly though, our study also found
that female participants indicated higher levels of current adjustment to the break-up than male participants, meaning that although women experienced more emotional disruption at the time of the break-up, it was men who took longer to fully adjust to the relationship dissolution.

The final portion of our study investigated differences in the frequency of communication between male and female exes, initiators and non-initiators of relational dissolution, those involved and those not involved in a current romantic relationship, as well as those who remained friends with their exes and those who did not. Although Hypotheses 8 and 9, which dealt with who initiated the break-up and comparisons between men and women, were not supported, our results did indicate that there were two significant factors that affected frequency of communication.

In support of Hypothesis 7, we discovered that those who were not currently involved in a romantic relationship communicated with their ex-partners more frequently than those who were in a romantic relationship. Those who had moved into a new romantic relationship were more likely than those who had not become romantically involved to communicate with their exes infrequently, less than once a month, or to have cut off all communication entirely. Those not currently involved in a romantic relationship were also more likely to initiate conversation or have communication initiated by their exes than those involved in a romantic relationship. These ideas are supported by the social exchange framework because those who had moved into a current romantic relationship no longer needed the benefits provided by their ex-partners, since they were getting it from a new romantic relationship. It also brings forth the idea that people weigh the costs and benefits of their relationships while evaluating potential alternative partners who may provide more benefits or fewer costs (Felmlee et al., 1990). Once the ex-partners are seen as more costly than beneficial due to the existence of a new romantic partner, communication dissipates.

Though we did not propose any hypotheses about those who were currently friends with their exes, our results demonstrated that current level of friendship with an ex was a significant predictor of the frequency of communication. We found that, as may be expected, those who remained friends with their exes after the romantic relationship had ended were more likely to communicate with their exes than those who had not maintained friendship status with their ex-partners. Conversely, those who did not remain friends with their ex-partners were more likely to report no communication with their exes. Our results also showed that those who were still friends with their ex-partners were significantly more likely to have a friendship in which both parties initiated communication equally.

The study by LeBel and Campbell (2009) that discussed the role of implicit partner affect, or spontaneous feelings about a partner, supported this idea in its finding that the more a person experienced spontaneous feelings about their partner, or in the current study’s case, an ex-partner, the more stable the relationship would be. Given that those not currently involved in a relationship and those who are still friends with their partners are more likely to experience implicit partner affect, the results that show more frequent communication and more initiation of communication from people who meet these criteria do not come as a surprise.
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One of the main limitations of the study was that it was obtained from a sample consisting solely of college students. While this is a necessary sample to study, given that many romantic relationships develop and dissolve in this environment, it may be beneficial for future researchers to expand by using a sample containing a variety of age groups. This would provide important insight into the differences between relationships at different ages. For instance, a relationship that exists and dissolves at the college level will likely be vastly different in comparison to a marriage that has dissolved.

The current study was also limited due to the fact that only one partner in the relationship was surveyed, eliminating the possibility of analyzing data from both initiators and non-initiators of the same relationship dissolution. It may benefit future research in the field of interpersonal relationships if both partners in the post-dissolutional relationships were interrogated and their results compared. This would provide interesting information about the specific differences between ex-partners, whether comparing who initiated the relationship, sex of respondents, or other variables. In addition, it may be beneficial in future research to specifically define friendship as a term for the participants. This may ensure that each respondent reflects on their relationship using consistent definitions of friendship.

A final limitation of the current study is the fact that differences in communication were determined by asking only two questions, which related to communication frequency and initiation of communication. While significant results were taken away from these two measurements, future research may draw out more results, or even more precise results, if the frequency of communication was measured using a scale with multiple items (much like the scales used in this study for satisfaction and adjustment).

Conclusion

While relationship dissolution has been an increasing focus for interpersonal scholars, only recently has this concept been observed as a complex process involving a variety of characteristics. When romantic relationships dissolve, there are often significant changes in the interaction between ex-partners. This study aimed to identify the types of factors that determine the quality of friendship that will likely be produced after two romantic partners terminate their relationship. However, while romantic relationships often dissolve, it is important to recognize that the termination of romantic ties does not necessarily lead to a termination of the relationship as a whole. Just as romantic relationships often start off as friendships, it is possible for them to end this way too. Though the term break-up often implies that the relational ties are severed or broken, it is essential to remember that the process of dissolution is often nothing more than a course for redefining the relationship. The romance may be broken after the disengagement process, but that does not mean the friendship cannot be repaired.
Reference


have terminated. *Communication Quarterly*, 52(1), 54-67. doi:10.1080/01463370409370178


-------------------

**Author’s Note**

I would like to give a special thank-you to Leah Ryan, my classmate at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN, who is currently a graduate student in Communication Studies at Northern Illinois University. Leah helped during the research stages and assisted in the survey distribution process. This research would not have been possible without her.
The Art of “Jesse-Talk”: Speechwriting for Governor Jesse Ventura

Kristine Bruss  
Assistant Professor and Basic Course Director  
kbruss@ku.edu  
Department of Communication Studies  
The University of Kansas  
Lawrence, KS

ABSTRACT

In 1998, former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura stunned the political world by winning the race for governor of Minnesota. As a candidate, Ventura created impressions of honesty with his straightforward, candid style; even his inaugural address was unscripted. As governor, however, Ventura came to rely on a team of speechwriters to help him meet his speaking demands. In this essay, I present an interview with one member of Ventura’s communications team, Steve LeBeau, who addresses the challenge of writing speeches for an unconventional client with a penchant for improvisation. As the essay reveals, LeBeau’s background in media and theater helped, as did a process of trial and error, through which speechwriters found ways to maintain a sense of “authentic Ventura” in the governor’s prepared remarks.

In 1998, Jesse Ventura, former professional wrestler, actor, and radio host, stunned the nation with his unexpected third-party victory in Minnesota’s gubernatorial election. At his inauguration, the straight-talking, always quotable Ventura spoke without a prepared manuscript, saying in the introduction of his address,

You know, I was down speaking in Austin, Minnesota, a week or so ago, a couple weeks ago, to the Austin High School, and I asked them, I said, “You know, I’m assuming this office, and all during the campaign I never used a note, I never had a prepared speech, ever,” and I asked those high school kids in Austin, “Should I change?” And they said, “Absolutely not.”

They told me we want to hear from your heart and we want to hear from your soul, so that’s what you’re going to get today. I’m not changing.

Ventura’s commitment to speaking without any preparation held fast during the campaign and at his inauguration, but as governor, he did change. Whereas candidate Ventura spoke completely off-the-cuff, Governor Ventura came to rely on a staff of speechwriters to help him meet the demands of his numerous and varied speaking engagements. The potential clash between Ventura’s larger-than-life personality and the political demands of the office constituted an interesting conundrum for speechwriters. How much of the “real” Ventura should be represented in speeches? Could speechwriters create a prepared text that portrayed Ventura’s heart and soul in the same manner as he did in his unprepared remarks? And perhaps most
importantly, how would the governor, an inveterate improver, deal with such texts? As journalist Paul Gray remarked after the election, “The question is not whether he [Ventura] can learn on the job—say what needs to be said, do what needs to be done, make nice when political advantage and simple prudence dictate such a course—but whether doing so will put him at odds with his own freewheeling nature” (57).

In this essay, I explore the process of speechwriting for Jesse Ventura, focusing on one particular facet of that process: the art of characterization. Called *ethopoeia* (literally “character-making”) in the ancient world, characterization involves keen judgment about how best to represent another speaker in a text.¹ As Bernard Duffy and Mark Royden Winchell explain, speechwriters “must find a ‘voice’ which, though not precisely the voice with which the client ordinarily speaks, captures the essence of the person and creates the image the speaker intends. The process is not imitative, it is representational. The ghostwriter seeks to establish through language a persona that is both interesting and believable” (104). As noted in a number of speechwriting studies, writing in a suitable voice demands consideration of the client’s distinctive qualities as well as expectations regarding his or her role, with the aim of seemingly artless, “authentic” portrayal.² According to Duffy and Winchell, “The first criterion of the ghostwritten speech or book is that it sound like the person with whom it will be most intimately identified, the client” (104).

As with any rhetorical practice, there is no simple template for representing a client’s voice effectively in a text; the speaker, speechwriter, audience, and occasion all affect the writer’s choices. This particular study of writing-in-character highlights how one speechwriter in the Ventura administration, Steve LeBeau, managed the process of characterization with his unconventional celebrity client, a client whose flamboyant persona and love of off-the-cuff speaking presented both opportunities and challenges for speechwriters. On the one hand, Ventura’s dynamic and distinctive speaking style ensured that he would be, at the very least, an interesting speaker, particularly when speaking extemporaneously. In modern politics, this quality is essential. As former president Richard Nixon once observed, “the only thing worse in politics than being wrong is being boring” (Stone para. 6). Of course, Ventura’s engaging style during the campaign was unscripted and spontaneous. As governor, he would be speaking on many occasions from prepared texts—a potential threat to his lively character. One of the most persistent criticisms of speechwriting, in fact, has been that it hides the true character of the speaker, substituting instead a conservative, watered-down persona (Einhorn, “Ghosts Unmasked” 42). As speechwriting critic Ernest Bormann has asserted, “The ghost has a tendency to be discreet and careful. He weakens adjectives and tones down the strength of statements. He knows the punishment for a misstatement or a careless word. He weighs and ponders every expression, and, as a result, he dilutes the distinctiveness and strength and spontaneity of whatever writing talent he may have” (287). The challenge for LeBeau and his fellow speechwriters was to retain the distinctiveness and strength and spontaneity so central to Ventura’s appeal while keeping him on message.
To explore how Ventura’s speechwriters navigated this process, I interviewed LeBeau, who worked for Governor Ventura and Lieutenant Governor Mae Schunk for four years as a member of the Communications Office. This essay features excerpts from that interview, along with illustrative examples from several of Ventura’s speeches, drawn primarily from Ventura’s first year in office, when the learning curve was steepest for both the governor and his writers. As the essay reveals, LeBeau’s approach to speechwriting, consistent with Ventura’s philosophy of speaking, was oriented strongly toward showmanship; this alignment enabled LeBeau to produce appropriate prose for Ventura. Ventura proved unpredictable, however, when handling that prose. Sometimes he rehearsed a bit, but most times he did not. And in some instances, he simply jettisoned the prepared text and spoke off the cuff. “The question,” said LeBeau, “especially in the first year, was whether he would actually read [the speeches].” Through trial and error, speechwriters learned how to capitalize on Ventura’s strengths while keeping him on message, finding the talking point system particularly useful. In what follows, I first provide a snapshot of Jesse “The Candidate” Ventura, who spoke on the campaign trail without the aid of speechwriters. I then explore LeBeau’s approach to creating “Jesse-talk” for Jesse “The Governor” Ventura.

Candidate Ventura: Unscripted

Jesse Ventura, currently a frequent guest on talk shows and author of books such as American Conspiracies: Lies, Lies, and More Dirty Lies that the Government Tells Us (2010), has been a pop culture figure for almost thirty years, rising to fame in the early 1980s as Jesse “The Body” Ventura, a flamboyant, trash talking professional wrestler. In a 1984 television interview with “Mean Gene” Okerlund of the World Wrestling Federation, the 6’4” Ventura, outfitted in a yellow tank top, matching cap, and dark sunglasses, foreshadowed the Jesse-talk that would become his trademark. Addressing Hulk Hogan, the reigning world champion of wrestling, Ventura bellowed: “Chump, somewhere, sometime, you’re going to have to face down with Jesse, ‘The Body’—275 pounds. And you won’t be poundin’ on no Sylvester Stallone no more!” Mean Gene interjected: “That isn’t going to happen overnight, Jesse Ventura. You very well know you’re going to have to work your way to the top to be in that number one contender’s position.” Ventura responded, “And you, Mean Gene, tell the truth. The chump’ll run. The chump’ll hide, and I’ll have to chase him down! THAT’s what you can tell the people out there!” (“Jesse ‘The Body’ Ventura”)

In 1998, Ventura brought the same kind of bluster to a very different kind of contest, the race for governor of Minnesota. Ventura’s name recognition was high at the time, thanks to his experience as a professional wrestler and commentator as well as roles in movies such as Predator and his job as a radio personality on KFAN in Minneapolis. His political resume, however, was slim, featuring only a four-year term as mayor of Brooklyn Park, a Minneapolis suburb. The summer before the election, the race was shaping up to be a conventional two-party affair between two well-known and experienced politicians, Republican Norm Coleman, mayor
of St. Paul, and Democrat Hubert “Skip” Humphrey III, the state’s attorney general. Then Ventura entered the race as the Reform Party candidate, and everything changed. Initially, Ventura was not taken seriously as a candidate, trailing considerably behind the other two candidates in early polls. An October 14 poll showed Humphrey with a comfortable lead at 44%, Coleman following at 31%, and Ventura bringing up the rear with 15%. But just under two weeks later, Ventura had closed the gap, with his support rising to 23% (“Polls”). As he had done in the world of professional wrestling, Ventura worked his way up, using his larger-than-life personality to his advantage. By the end of October, the straight-talking, colorful Ventura had become a real threat.

Ventura’s momentum was due in no small measure to his performances in a series of debates, broadcast statewide on television and radio, which underscored his populist, “man-of-the-people” appeal. During the debates, Ventura took every opportunity to characterize his opponents, Humphrey and Coleman, as “career politicians,” portraying himself, in contrast, as a private citizen in touch with average Minnesotans. In response to a question about taxes in the first debate, for instance, Ventura stated:

I’ve earned my entire living basically in the private sector. My two opponents have been cashing government checks their entire life. They are career politicians, so it’s imperative for them to make government bigger, better, and stronger because that’s where they’ve been working their entire lives is in the government. I’ve been out working in the private sector, paying those taxes, and frankly, I’ve had enough. (“Gubernatorial Debate”)

Ventura showed himself to be quick witted, as well. In one memorable exchange in the same debate, Humphrey and Coleman, who did their best to ignore Ventura, were arguing heatedly about Coleman’s knowledge of farm families, at which point the moderator interjected: “Mr. Ventura deserves a chance to get in on this match.” Ventura, eliciting the first hearty laughs of the debate, responded in his authoritative baritone, “Well, I think it shows obviously who’s above all this, doesn’t it?” After a brief pause, Ventura added, “I’m embarrassed as a United States citizen and as a veteran to what both of these two premier parties, the Democrats and Republicans, are sinking to today.” Ventura continued in this vein throughout the debates, reinforcing his plain-talking, anti-establishment persona. As Jon Jeter of the Washington Post reported, “In the theater that is politics, the big man with the cleanshaven head and the deep voice has a clear advantage over Humphrey and Coleman, both of whom are regarded as more cautious than charismatic” (para. 9).

Ventura clearly set himself apart from the other candidates during the debates, but his colorful personality was particularly evident on the campaign trail. In the last few days before the election, Ventura traveled throughout Minnesota in an RV on what he called his “Victory Tour.” Reporter Tom Hauser, who covered Ventura during the campaign and as governor, was along for the ride. A typical scene, as described by Hauser:
Ventura steps out the door of his RV, twirling his fist above his head and whipping hundreds of cheering students into a frenzy at Gustavus Adolphus College.

“This is a lot like National Lampoon’s Animal House,” Ventura says, joking about his raucous campaign road trip. “In fact, you can just call us the Deltas!” He climbs into the back of a pickup to address the crowd. “It’s kind of like going up to that top rope again,” he says, alluding to his wrestling days. “It’s been awhile since I did that.” (24)

Ventura’s message resonated with voters along the tour. On election day, 61% of Minnesota voters—the highest turnout in the country—cast their votes and elected Jesse “The Body” Ventura as governor. Ventura, who won 37% of the votes to Coleman’s 35% and Humphrey’s 28%, became the biggest political story in the country (“Minnesota Race Summary”). In post-election analyses, commentators attributed Ventura’s electoral success to a variety of factors, including voter dissatisfaction with the major parties, clever advertising (e.g., TV ads featuring a Jesse Ventura action figure taking on “Evil Special Interest Man”), shrewd targeting of demographic groups (e.g., young voters; the working class), and Minnesota election laws (which allow for same-day voter registration), but all agreed that Ventura’s colorful character played a major role. Political scientist Steven Schier asserted that Ventura’s greatest opportunity in the election was, in fact, his style, arguing that the “button-down” Humphrey and Coleman “provided a nice gray backdrop for Jesse’s campaign antics. Every act needs a straight man, and Jesse had two of them” (9). In comparison to his opponents, Ventura seemed not only more colorful but more honest. After the election, reporter Micah Sifry talked to a shuttle driver who voted for Ventura based on his honest, anti-establishment character. The driver explained, “If you had a choice between a guy who kept his childhood nickname, Skip, a turncoat who switched parties from Democrat to Republican, and someone who spoke honestly, who would you pick?” (40).

The spontaneous talk that earned Ventura a reputation for honesty continued through the night of his inaugural address, which he delivered without a prepared manuscript. The address lacked the polish of carefully crafted political oratory, marked instead by redundant wording (“I will do the best job I can possibly do to the best of my ability”), switches in verb tense (“I know when I coached football at Champlin Park High School, the young men that I worked with there, I always tell them. . .”), and incorrect usage (“I also want to thank many of my teammates, many of who are here”), but it was unmistakably Ventura. He promised to speak from the heart, just as he had on the campaign trail. In his book I Ain’t Got Time to Bleed, Ventura underscored the importance his unscripted campaign character, saying, “I’m very proud of the fact that throughout all the debates, I never used a single note. I never read from a prewritten speech. I spoke from the heart. . . . The people saw honesty in me; in the other two candidates they saw political rhetoric, the same shit they’d been having shoved down their throats for years upon years” (166).
Ventura’s unscripted Jesse-talk was highly effective during the campaign, when he played the role of entertaining truth teller on the outside looking in. With the election, his role changed. As Paul Gray pointed out, Ventura was “poised to take command of the very power structure he so vividly and colorfully ran against” (57). Put differently, Ventura was about to become part of the system, and in so doing, would have to speak as a representative of a governmental office, not as an individual citizen. As a candidate, Ventura repeated the same core messages over and over in an effort to persuade voters to elect him. His subject was himself: his background, his experiences, and his opinions about topics such as taxes, education, and the other candidates. As governor, Ventura’s speaking demands changed. In his first year, Ventura gave addresses ranging from the State of the State to remarks at the Asian Minnesota Business Summit to testimony on milk pricing. Ventura was expected to speak often, addressing diverse topics, audiences, and occasions; these demands necessitated the use of speechwriters. Furthermore, Ventura’s celebrity profile attracted a great deal of media scrutiny, which reinforced the need for careful attention to the governor’s speeches. During his early tenure, Ventura learned to work with speechwriters, and the speechwriters, including Steve LeBeau, learned how to produce texts for their atypical client, who was gifted at speaking off the cuff and eager to take every opportunity to do so.

Writing Lines for Jesse “The Governor” Ventura

When Steve LeBeau started his job with the Ventura administration, he had never written a speech for anyone. He became a speechwriter shortly after meeting Mae Schunk, who had just been elected Lieutenant Governor, at a local Hmong celebration. “I said, ‘Hey, I want to work for you guys!’ And she says, ‘Well, do you write speeches?’ And I said, ‘I sure do!’ [laughing], although I never had.” LeBeau sent in a resume, and he was hired. As a member of the communications staff in the Ventura administration, LeBeau wrote speeches for the governor and lieutenant governor and also “Jesse-ized” speeches prepared by various state agencies, such as Transportation and Agriculture. Although various people contributed to the speeches, LeBeau noted that there “was a core of about four of us that wrote the vast bulk.” LeBeau’s speeches were at times reviewed by the Communications Director or Chief of Staff, or checked for factual accuracy by an agency in the administration, but generally, he said, he “didn’t have too much oversight” and was able to give speeches right to Ventura.

In our interview, LeBeau noted that he was not responsible for major addresses such as the State of the State speeches, which are oriented more toward policy than personality. He acknowledged that speechwriters did produce a more “toned-down” Ventura for his most formal speeches. On those occasions, explained LeBeau, “you get a teleprompter, and you rehearse, and every word means something, and if you get it wrong—you’re laying out your intentions, your aims, your goals that you want to accomplish in the next year or so, and you’re not only letting lawmakers know what your priorities are, but you’re letting the people know why it should be their priority.” As attested by the texts of Ventura’s State of the State addresses, the governor
was clearly speaking more as the voice of his administration than as himself on those occasions. The speeches included occasional Ventura-esque comments (e.g., “to paraphrase my good friend Arnold Schwarzenegger: ‘Unicameral will be back’”), but much of the material had a very conventional quality. In his 2001 State of the State address, for example, Ventura remarked that the state of the state “requires us to look bravely at the status quo, raise questions and challenge the complicated system we have today. As we work together to challenge this system, let us do it without misinformation [sic] and mischaracterization of what this plan is really about” (11). Speaking a bit later on the topic of education, Ventura observed, “It is a different world today and will be a much different world tomorrow. And in education, as in business, it is the tomorrow that we must prepare for” (14). One would be hard-pressed to find the autobiographical Ventura uttering such statements, or calling for “constructive dialogue” (5), as he did in his 2001 State of the State address, but the speech was not about him; it was clearly a team effort designed to showcase policy, not personality.

If Ventura’s highly formal addresses, such as the State of the State, were the only evidence of the impact of speechwriters on his speeches, one might conclude that the practice of ghosting does, in fact, water down the character of the speaker. Although this may hold true with formal speeches, it does not necessarily apply in all speaking situations, as LeBeau’s experiences confirm. In the speeches that he worked on for Ventura, which ranged from a welcome for Vaclav Havel to a keynote speech for the Society of Professional Journalists, LeBeau found ways to capitalize on the governor’s distinctive style. One major advantage for LeBeau was his background in entertainment. Despite never having written speeches, LeBeau transitioned to his new job smoothly, thanks to a valuable set of skills and insights gained from his extensive experience in radio and his participation in community theater and comedy improvisation. LeBeau’s philosophy of “speechwriting as entertainment” enabled him, on a general level, to create an engaging voice in his speeches, and more specifically, to “Jesse-ize” those speeches appropriately.

**General Approach to Characterization: Speechwriting as Theater**

Peggy Noonan, former speechwriter for another celebrity politician, Ronald Reagan, once observed that “a speech is part theater and part political declaration” (68). In his interview, LeBeau articulated a similar perspective, drawing numerous parallels between speechwriting and theater when describing the general strategies he found valuable when writing for Ventura. An important aim, LeBeau said, was to create an entertaining world for listeners, much as a playwright creates a world for theahegoers. He explained:

There’s that sense in writing a speech that’s the same as theater in that you have to grab these people and carry them with you, whether it’s a play or whether it’s a speech. Unless you engage them, they’ll never be persuaded. People aren’t primarily logical. Logic is built on afterwards. I write with logic, but I grab with emotions and feelings and images. So what the theater does is it creates a little
world that you’re in for awhile. What a movie does is create a little world. So you’re all in the process of world-making, and I think there’s a lot that those things have in common.

Part of the playwright’s task in creating a captivating little world is to create engaging characters. Here, too, LeBeau noted a parallel to speechwriting, stating, “That’s how I see the speaker, as a character in a play. Basically, you’re writing a script, or a play, a theatrical piece for them.”

When LeBeau was in that “groove,” he said, his writing flowed. “I don’t know why, but speechwriting is the easiest thing in the world for me. Any other kind of writing is difficult—to turn in an assignment in school, or a commentary—but for speechwriting it would just flow because I could get into character and write.”

LeBeau’s theater experience, which included small parts in plays as well as arts coverage for the radio, helped him develop and refine his sense of how to engage an audience. He noted:

There was a period of five years where I saw two or three things a week, pretty much anything that happened in town. You just develop an ear. If you watch enough baseball you get a sense of the game. If you watch enough people delivering entertainment to an audience, you get a sense of it. . . . When you perform, or even when you’re on radio or TV—whenever you’re talking to an audience, there’s something that clicks in that you get it.

What LeBeau “got” about audiences is that they want to be engaged by a speech and by the speaker. As he noted, “You don’t want to be dominated by the audience. You don’t want to just say what you think they want you to say. It’s got to be genuine; you’ve got to express yourself. But they’ve got to like it. It’s got to be one of these things that goes back and forth. It’s got to circulate. It’s got to be an interaction.”

An essential strategy for creating this sense of interaction and putting listeners in the “little world” of the speech, according to LeBeau, is to write for the ear, which he learned to do by writing for radio. In his early days in radio, LeBeau quickly found that his style was not at all well-suited to the medium. He recalled:

When I first started I had no idea what I was doing, so I would write basically philosophical, graduate-style sentences, and the anchors and reporters would come to read the stuff and they’d say [laughing], “I can’t read this. It’s too long.” And they would start marking things up, splitting the long sentences, first of all, and then using diacritical marks to point out where they would need to emphasize things as they read, which also I later used in diagramming speeches for people as a speech coach. I went to the library and got several books on writing for broadcast, and whenever they all agreed on the same thing, I followed that.

Books on broadcast newswriting (see, e.g, Block; Hewlitt; Thompson) offer the same basic advice on oral language: Use active voice. Place emphatic words at the ends of sentences. Avoid subordinate clauses. Avoid negative constructions. Include only one idea per sentence. In LeBeau’s words, such language is “grabbable.” News items must be constructed from “simple language—simple words, and vivid words,” said LeBeau. “Radio is the medium of the mind,
because you’re listening, and you supply the image with your imagination. It’s the same thing when giving a speech, so you have to use vivid, clear, simple language to grab people.”

If vivid, simple language grabs people, stories and strong thematic logic, which LeBeau associated with the “flow” of a speech, keep them inside the little world of the speech. According to LeBeau, stories are an essential element for engaging listeners. “You have to tell stories. You have to conjure up an image in the audience’s mind in order to take them with you. If they’re just there, they’re going to daydream, or think about something else, or finish their dessert, or play with their shoe, or something. You have to engage them, first thing.” Le Beau stated that after an audience is hooked, they need to be carried along by a clear thematic element. “A lot of people say, ‘Tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them.’ You know, I don’t do that exactly, but there is a certain mode of repetition that does work. I would go for a thematic repetition rather than literal repetition. I’m big on flow and logic, so that when you move on to the next thing it’s seamless.”

For LeBeau, creating a little world demands this sort of flow. The converse is true, as well: if anything breaks the flow, the world (i.e., the engaging experience of the speech) is shattered. This observation is particularly salient with respect to ghostwriting, which demands careful concealment of the speechwriter’s presence. According to LeBeau, if a speech sounds ghosted, it draws attention to itself, and therein lies the problem. Drawing another analogy to theater, LeBeau observed, “If the lighting is so striking that you’re paying attention to the lighting, that’s bad. If the set is so outstanding that you keep paying attention to the set, that’s bad. Everything has to mesh so that the story goes through. If an actor is overacting, if there’s anything that dominates more than it should, it’s bad.” The individual elements of a production should not be noticeable but rather blend seamlessly together. “That’s why if a person sounds like he’s reading, that’s bad.” Well-rehearsed, extemporaneous-sounding speech is the ideal, LeBeau said, “because you don’t want anything to interrupt the flow of creating this little world. It’s got to be immediate, it’s got to be there, and if anything jars it—oops!”

If listeners are distracted by the apparent mismatch between the speaker and his or her lines, their attention is momentarily lost, and it may be hard to regain. Drawing on his experiences in both radio and as a disc jockey in a club (“in the days when it was record-to-record”), LeBeau explained: “When you play records, while one is ending, you’ve got to start cueing the other one up, so that the sound overlaps, and there’s not this pause. When there’s silence, when there’s a break, you leave the world. . . . Being in a world is being in a mood. If you break the world, you break the mood. And people, given the chance, will go on to the next thing.” Put in the context of speechwriting, if the ghost makes a noticeable entrance into the world, listeners may well exit. If they do, one might conclude that they no longer find the world of the speech, nor the character at its center, compelling. As LeBeau pointed out, a great speech must, first and foremost, serve its purpose, “but to do that, it’s got to be entertaining, it’s got to get people engaged, and it’s got to be given well”—a philosophy very much in keeping with the style of LeBeau’s celebrity client, Jesse Ventura.
Specific Strategies: Characterizing Ventura

LeBeau’s entertainment-oriented approach to speechwriting was certainly an advantage in his position, but adapting to the Ventura’s delivery style took some effort. The governor’s penchant for generating much of his speech material on the spot is attested by his collection of speeches, available on the Web site of the Minnesota Historical Society. Many of the “speeches” listed are simply talking points, and, as noted in explanatory remarks on the collection, prepared texts “often served only to guide Ventura’s words” (Governor Ventura Speeches Collection). LeBeau confirmed that many prepared texts got jettisoned in the early days of Ventura’s tenure.

At first, he [Ventura] didn’t know any of the policies, he just knew what he believed, and that’s why he threw so many speeches away, because it was better to just say what he knew rather than try to quickly absorb some new policy. But by the end of three years, he knew the stuff, so you didn’t have to write it out. You’d have to write a bullet point and then put, “Talk about related incident when you were in the SEALS,” and then he would just wing it.

According to LeBeau, Ventura became increasingly easy to write for as the speechwriters figured out what worked best for him, but the process was marked by considerable trial and error. Ventura’s tendency to improvise introduced an air of unpredictability in his speechmaking. As noted above, the governor rejected some speeches entirely, opting instead to speak spontaneously. LeBeau recalled, for example, a speech prepared by Communications Director John Wodele for Ventura’s appearance on the National Press Club. The speech went through major revisions, but Ventura never used it. “We were watching on C-Span, and he never got to it. Just did his Jesse-talk. Other times I’ve seen him walk into a place and one of his advisors would come up and say, ‘What are you talking about?’ ‘Well, I’m going to this group.’ ‘Let me look at that. Oh, don’t read this. Just wing it.’” Then Ventura would speak off the cuff, which LeBeau said was often better than reading the prepared speech.

To illustrate, LeBeau pointed to an address he wrote for Ventura to deliver to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a pro-Israel lobby. LeBeau did his homework, talking to Jewish friends and others whom they recommended as resources, and he found a number of ways to connect Ventura and Minnesota to Israel. In the text LeBeau prepared, Ventura was to draw a military connection between himself and Ehud Barak, stating, “I have not yet had a chance to meet Israel’s new Prime Minister—A-HUDE BARAK. But I think I might like this guy. He’s a warrior, the most decorated soldier in Israeli history, but his big fight now is for peace. Rest assured, nobody appreciates peace more than a soldier” (points 5 and 6). The text then pointed out the important business relationship between Minnesota and Israel, noting that trade and investment may be the best way to promote peace in Israel. Finally, the text addressed the Jewish community in Minnesota, mentioning prominent Jewish politicians and organizations. LeBeau ran the speech by his contacts, and they approved.

When Ventura delivered the speech, however, he created a very different “little world” than the one LeBeau created on paper. According to LeBeau, Ventura did not even see the
speech until he was enroute to the event. “He’s looking through it, and he says, ‘I don’t know anything about Israel.’ So he’s scratching all these parts out, and then gets into one part talking about Jewish Minnesotans, a few prominent ones.” As it turns out, the bit about prominent Jewish Minnesotans was about the only part of LeBeau’s text that survived. “When he gets there, instead of following the speech, he just does his Jesse-talk, just something that he pulls out of his hat that’s extemporaneous. Everybody loves it. And then he gets around finally to the little—‘Oh, and these Jewish people in Minnesota’—and then talks about them a little bit. And everybody applauded and sat down.” Listeners may have enjoyed the speech, but the reporters who covered it noticed something amiss. After the event, LeBeau said, “the local Jewish paper came out and said, ‘Ventura Addresses AIPAC; Doesn’t Mention Israel’ [laughs]. And so, I talked to the reporter: ‘Why didn’t he talk about Israel?’ ‘Well he didn’t read the damn speech. That’s why he didn’t mention Israel!’”

Although some of LeBeau’s work was for naught, he said that Ventura read most of the speeches he prepared for him during his first year in office. Some of those speeches were submitted by other agencies and needed to be revised to sound like Ventura. As LeBeau explained:

The way his speeches worked, usually it would be one of the agencies, like Transportation, or Education, or Administration, or Tourism—they’d always be competing to have him come and talk about their thing. [Referring to a speech on housing]: Housing got him to come and talk. That was tough, because their people would write the speech and send it to us, and then we’d Jesse-ize it, turn it into something that, first of all, people can bear listening to, and then make it sound like him. A lot of the speeches that came in were just terrible; they were not good speeches for anybody. Whenever they’d try to do rhetoric, get rid of that, point blank. Get the content, and then transform that into the speech that you wrote—a lot of transformation. That’s how a lot of Jesse’s worked.

LeBeau’s approach to writing in an engaging voice, described earlier, helped to turn Ventura’s texts into something “people can bear listening to.” As for making those speeches sound like Ventura, LeBeau had the good fortune of writing for a client with an easily replicable style. As humorist Garrison Keillor observed right after the 1998 gubernatorial election, “everybody in Minnesota can do a pretty good Jesse imitation” (which he illustrated by describing Ventura as “THIS GREAT BIG HONKING BULLET-HEADED SHOVEL-FACED MUTHA WHO TALKS IN A STEROID GROWL AND DOESN’T STOP” (57).

LeBeau found another resource valuable in imitating the governor’s style: I Ain’t Got Time to Bleed, Ventura’s first book. “That was important in forming my style,” said LeBeau. He noted that the book, which Ventura described as being “mostly about me, about where I stand, and about where I came from” (4), was written for the ear, not the eye, and as such, it reinforced everything LeBeau had been hearing from Ventura. Consider Ventura’s thoughts on crime, as expressed in the book: “Shouldn’t criminals be expected to behave in prison? I think they should set it up so that if your sentence is three years and you misbehave, you’ll do five! That’s the
mindset we need!’” (28). Or on gun control: “Do you know who was the last political leader to insist that every gun owner be registered? Hitler!” (31). Or on welfare: “Do you know what welfare is? It’s taking money from someone who is working to give to someone who’s not!” (33). LeBeau wasn’t impressed by the book initially. He recalled: “When I sat down to read it, I thought, ‘This is terrible. This is just terribly written.’ But then I thought, ‘Well, he’s just talking into a tape recorder,’ so then, if I imagined him saying it, it sounded like him, and I was able to finish as if listening to him.”

LeBeau’s art of Jesse-talk is well-illustrated by one of the first speeches he wrote for Ventura, a welcome for Czech President Vaclav Havel, who visited Minnesota in the spring of 1999. In preparing the speech, LeBeau did not meet with the governor until the last minute, which he said was typical. Instead, after receiving the assignment, he conducted the necessary research on Havel, drew on what he knew about Ventura, and found ways to integrate the two. LeBeau also looked to current events for inspiration. “Jesse was always in the news, and it was already pronounced by that time that he didn’t get along with the media, so I made a big deal about the First Amendment. It can go both ways.” In the speech text, LeBeau described Havel’s struggle to express himself in the absence of First Amendment protections, contrasting that with Ventura’s experience in Minnesota. He wrote, “Let me tell you President Havel that the freedom of the press is alive and well here in Minnesota. They might be a pain in the butt sometimes but they sure as hell are alive and well. I can tell you that much” (para. 5). Throughout the speech, LeBeau mimicked Jesse-talk through short sentences, simple subject-verb-object constructions, fragments, and rhetorical questions, adding colloquial expressions (“pain in the butt”; “sure as hell”) and sarcasm (“Imagine that, an intellectual who wants results!”) for good measure. The description of Havel’s situation in the Czech Republic reflected Ventura’s no-nonsense style of dispensing wisdom:

Yes sir, Vaclav Havel was a rebel, a “Truly Dangerous man,” an enemy of the state. An enemy of big government.

Do you want to know what happens when you think government can solve every problem? When government takes over the role of the parent? When government tries to tell you what to think and how to behave?

President Havel saw what happens. He also saw tanks rolling through the streets of his hometown, rolling over his neighbors and friends. (pars. 8-10) Ventura had little advance time with the Havel speech, but he delivered it well, and it was well-received, leading LeBeau to speculate that, for this speech, Ventura may have rehearsed a bit.

LeBeau was not as satisfied with the outcome of another speech that he penned for Ventura, a keynote address to the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). The speech, “When I Hate the News Media,” was written in edgy Ventura style. Unlike the cautious ghosts that Ernest Bormann described, LeBeau opted for intensity, using the word “hate” (instead of weaker alternatives such as “dislike,” “am disappointed by,” and “find objectionable”) repeatedly in the introduction to describe Ventura’s relationship with journalists. In the text, Ventura described the process of finding a title for his talk, identifying a number of alternatives, including “I Hate the
News Media,” “How I Hate the News Media,” “How Do I Hate Thee? Let Me Count the Ways,” and finally, “When I Hate the News Media.” LeBeau said that Ventura himself was concerned that the speech might be a bit too edgy, but LeBeau, having just left the Board of Directors of SPJ, assured him that it was fine. The text featured short, punchy statements, humorous lines (e.g., “So tonight I’m going to talk about when it is that I hate the media. I should be finished in about three hours”), and rhetorical questions—eighteen of them. Despite the suitability of the style and subject matter, the speech was not as effective as it could have been (although it was quoted in the paper, which always pleases LeBeau). The problem, said LeBeau, was that Ventura did not rehearse the speech and thus failed to deliver it fluently.

An audiotaped version of the speech confirms LeBeau’s assessment. Fluency was indeed a problem, not because Ventura misread or stumbled over his words, but because the scripted quality of the speech was so obvious. The manuscript became particularly noticeable when Ventura began inserting ad-libbed comments, the first of which occurred during his introduction. Ventura initially got big laughs when he announced his original idea for the title of his speech: “I Hate the News Media.” He continued, “It’s simple, direct, it expresses how I feel. But then I thought, it’s not fully accurate, it was somehow incomplete. So then I thought about this title: How I Hate the Media.” Ventura received the expected laughs with this line, but by the time he got to the actual title, “When I Hate the News Media,” there was little response from the audience. Ventura then improvised and said, “It’s okay. I’ll tell you guys you can laugh, okay? This is light. This is fun tonight. But there’s also a message.” This line got the desired response but left Ventura with no smooth way back into the text, which resumed with the line, “That’s it, I thought, that says it.” The line, of course, followed from the title of the speech, not from Ventura’s spontaneous comment, thus interrupting that all-important sense of flow that LeBeau worked so hard to create. Although the speech was written in Ventura’s style, his ad-libbed remarks did not mesh well with the prepared material.

Ventura also broke one of the cardinal rules of speechwriting with this performance by explicitly drawing attention to his speechwriter. About midway through the speech, Ventura listed eight instances in which he hates the news media. The final item, “when you question my singing ability” (an allusion to an earlier dust-up with journalists over Ventura’s performance with Warren Zevon), drew laughter from the crowd. Departing from his script, Ventura remarked, “Pretty good writer, isn’t it? I liked it. That’s why I’m going with it.” With this unconventional move, Ventura defied the expectation that speechwriters should remain hidden, and in so doing, he jarred listeners out of the “little world” of the speech. This off-the-cuff remark, like the others in the speech, may have detracted from the flow of the speech as it was originally planned, yet at the same time, it contributed to the authenticity of the performance, conveying a sense of “genuine Jesse” to listeners. In calling attention to his speechwriter, Ventura effectively dissociated himself from his prepared text (the performance of which was falling a bit flat) while confirming that he had control over the lines he was speaking: “I liked it. That’s why I’m going with it.” The authentic Ventura thus put his stamp on the script while
suggesting that the less-than-stellar performance was attributable to a method of delivery demanded by the office but not ideal for him.

One final speech example highlights the challenge of working with the unpredictable Ventura. As illustrated by the Havel welcome speech and the SPJ keynote, LeBeau was never concerned about toning down the intensity of Ventura’s character. Rather, he said, “the challenge was to keep him on message.” LeBeau illustrated this point with a speech written by staff in the Department of Agriculture, which he had “Jesse-ized.” On the way to the speech, Ventura, who was stuck in traffic, called LeBeau, who was waiting at the venue, with questions about the speech. LeBeau recalled, “I put a joke in there. There was this bumper sticker, ‘My Governor Can Beat Up Your Governor.’ For the first time in my knowledge he was going to be appearing with another governor, so I thought I’d put in a joke about that. He was questioning that, and I said, ‘No, no, it’ll be fine.’ Actually, it went over well.” LeBeau had to be a bit more resourceful in dealing with Ventura’s next concern. Although the speech addressed agricultural policy, Ventura told LeBeau that what he really wanted to talk about was then-Mayor Norm Coleman’s plan to raise taxes for a new stadium in St. Paul. “Of course, Jesse was against public funding for a stadium. So he says, ‘Well, I thought I’d use this opportunity to do that.’ And it was very hard to tell Jesse—to confront him, because he enjoyed battling you and wouldn’t listen to you, generally. All I could do is say, ‘If you could weave that into a soundbite that talks about your agricultural trade stuff so that they don’t edit it out, then fine. But otherwise, that’ll become the soundbite, and they’ll ignore your agricultural trade stuff.’” LeBeau’s strategy worked. Ventura delivered the speech as written, without inserting any comments about the stadium or Coleman. “You never know what he’s going to do until he’s up there, so I didn’t say, ‘Don’t do it,’ I said, ‘If you do it.’ I gave him an ‘if-then,’ and that seemed to work.”

Although Ventura’s unpredictability created challenges for speechwriters, LeBeau saw it as an asset, maintaining that the best parts of the governor’s speeches tended to be the ones he generated himself. For that reason, speechwriters worked to develop a system that would present Ventura at his most authentic and allow them to make the unpredictable a bit more predictable. From LeBeau’s perspective, the best approach was the talking-point speech, which he described as a sort of glorified outline that provided some structure yet allowed Ventura ample opportunities to talk off the top of his head.

As soon as we figured out how it worked, that he would spend half the time ad-libbing, then we would write it at the proper length. If he was supposed to talk for half-an-hour, you don’t write a half-hour speech. You write a fifteen-minute speech and let him ad lib for fifteen; otherwise you’d go way long. And still, the most interesting part was the ad lib. You’d set up ad lib is basically what you’d do—give him the information to use and let him go from there.

In short, the talking point system allowed for much of the Jesse-talk to be generated by Ventura himself. Summarizing Ventura’s strengths, LeBeau noted that he “was very good at playing to audiences in general. Maybe he didn’t always get it right, but that’s what he was a master at. He
became a professional wrestler because he knew what he was doing as far as reaching people. So we would never second-guess him about what would work.”

Conclusion

Shortly after his election as governor, Jesse Ventura appeared on Meet the Press with two of his fellow governors, Gray Davis of California and Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey. Ventura was his outspoken self, talking candidly with moderator Tim Russert about tax cuts and concealed weapons permits. After the show, Governor Whitman commented to reporters about Ventura’s willingness to speak his mind, saying, “He has a freedom of expression that many other politicians don’t enjoy to the same degree” (Hauser 107). That freedom of expression, unusual among high-profile politicians, is precisely what makes Ventura so interesting as a speechwriting client. As this study has shown, Ventura’s freedom to speak his mind allowed his speechwriters more freedom, as well. As indicated by interview comments and speech texts, Steve LeBeau was not at all the timid, character-muting ghost described by Bormann; rather, he had considerable latitude in penning engaging lines for his colorful client. Although Ventura’s character was toned down in some of his most formal policy-oriented addresses, other speeches clearly reflected his trademark Jesse-talk, thanks to carefully scripted lines or judiciously chosen talking points, which allowed Ventura to be himself while staying on message.

The interview with LeBeau does not tell the whole story of speechwriting in the Ventura administration, for he was not the only person who wrote speeches for Ventura. LeBeau simply offers one perspective on that process, a perspective that draws attention to the ethopoetic art of maintaining a sense of authentic character in a ghosted text. Impressions of authenticity depend, in large measure, on the degree to which a speaker appears to be speaking from the heart, something Ventura understood well. Recall his observation about the campaign: “I never read from a pre-written speech. I spoke from the heart. . .The people saw honesty in me; in the other two candidates they saw political rhetoric” (166). As governor, Ventura could no longer make the claim about not using prepared speeches, yet people still saw honesty in him. His prepared speeches may not have featured his most provocative opinions (e.g., that “organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people,” as reported in a 1999 Playboy interview), but they nevertheless maintained a sense of “authentic Jesse” by mimicking the governor’s candid style and allowing for improvisation.

Granted, the process of characterization described here may offer limited guidance for speechwriters whose clients lack colorful personalities and improvisational skills, but the general principles of speechwriting that LeBeau emphasized throughout his interview are broadly applicable. LeBeau’s observations, for examples about writing for the ear, storytelling, the importance of practice, and the effectiveness of extemporaneous speaking provide powerful “real world” reinforcement of principles typically emphasized in public speaking classrooms. Such principles are audience-centered, to be sure, but as this study shows, they are also essential for the expression of interesting and believable character, a quality desirable not only in flamboyant celebrity politicians but in all types of speakers.
Works Cited


**Endnotes**

1 *Ethopoeia* is discussed as a virtue of speechwriting in Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s *Lysias*. Additional descriptions of *ethopoeia* can be found in the *progymnasmata* (composition exercises of ancient Greek teachers; see Kennedy for examples.


3 Ventura developed an antagonistic relationship with the media early in his term as governor. For Ventura’s perspective on that relationship, see his book *Do I Stand Alone*, especially chapter 3, “Our Irresponsible Media.” For the opinions of journalists, see Coffman.
Paws, Pathos and Presidential Persuasion: Franklin Roosevelt’s “Fala Speech” as Precursor and Model for Richard Nixon’s “Checkers Speech”

John Llewellyn  
Associate Professor  
llewelly@wfu.edu  
Department of Communication  
Wake Forest University  
Winston-Salem, NC

ABSTRACT

In autumn 1944 Franklin Roosevelt’s presidential campaign was losing momentum. Then, in Congressional debate, U. S. Representative Harold Knutson of Minnesota accused Roosevelt of extravagance, claiming he sent a Navy destroyer to the Aleutian Islands to retrieve his Scottish terrier. FDR parried these charges with “the Fala speech,” a mocking and acerbic attack on Republicans (“No, not content with that, they now include my little dog, Fala”) that reenergized his campaign. “The Fala speech” also indirectly rescued Richard Nixon. Under attack in the 1952 campaign, Nixon saved his vice presidential aspirations and political career with the “Checkers” address. However, the origin of “Checkers” in FDR’s “Fala Speech” has been ignored. These rhetorical rescues offer insight into banality and pathos in political rhetoric.

The connection between U.S. presidents and dogs is an enduring one. The most current instance is provided by Barack Obama. A celebration was held in Chicago’s Grant Park on November 4, 2008, to introduce Obama and his family to the American people as First Family-elect. In his remarks, Obama announced to his daughters that they would be getting a long-desired puppy: “Sasha and Malia, I love you both more than you can imagine. You have earned the puppy that is coming with us” (“Tough Decision,” 2008, p. 30). While this ceremony was to mark the monumental election of the nation’s first African-American president, the puppy revelation became its signature moment.

In the aftermath, the national media featured numerous stories analyzing what sort of breed would be best in the White House (Seelye, 2008). Not to be outdone, two days later President George W. Bush’s Scottish terrier, Barney, reclaimed the national spotlight by biting the finger of a Reuters reporter (“Bush’s pet,” 2008, p. 2). Dogs, or even the suggestion of a dog, galvanize public attention on the White House. Five months after the promise of a puppy, in April 2009 President Obama and his family greeted “Bo,” a Portuguese water dog, a gift from Senator and Mrs. Edward Kennedy (Stolberg, 2009, p. A16).

Dogs have found their way into policy statements as well. George W. Bush defended his position on the Iraq war with the hyperbolic claim that he would not change it even if his wife
and Scottish terrier were his last allies: "I will not withdraw, even if Laura and Barney are the only ones supporting me," according to Bob Woodward (Harris, 2006, p. 1).

The Bush statement captured the public imagination, even if the policy did not, because the president made his point while bringing man’s best friend into the political equation. Dogs have been fixtures in many presidencies but it has been six decades since their influence was at its zenith (Rowan & Janis, 1997). This article examines the two most prominent dogs ever associated with political campaign rhetoric. Both of these dogs were brought to prominence by Minnesota Congressman Harold Knutson’s charges against President Roosevelt. On August 31, 1944, Knutson alluded to a rumor that FDR had sent a naval destroyer back to the Aleutian Islands to collect his Scottie Fala, left behind during a tour of Pacific defense operations (Stuhler, 1990, p. 30). In his September 23 speech FDR rebutted Knutson’s charges and used them as a springboard to flay the Republicans for anti-labor policies.

The speeches featuring Fala and Checkers were pivotal in the two most notable campaign rescues in American history. These speeches were not only exercises in political survival but also examples of the one-strike reversal of fortune. Political leaders risk charges of banality or triviality to talk of dogs when national affairs hang in the balance. Yet these two allegedly jejune excursions were singularly successful. These rhetors mounted stridently partisan and effective arguments that are remembered through the disarming cuddly synecdoche of the dogs’ names. How were these transformations accomplished and what can they show us about the utility of the rhetorical commonplace?

Political observers easily recognize Checkers, Richard Nixon’s Cocker Spaniel, enshrined in the eponymous speech where he played a cameo role. The other animal featured is Fala, Franklin Roosevelt’s Scottish terrier. This dog was more famous in his own time than Checkers though his rhetorical highlight is less widely remembered. The common features of Checkers and Fala belie the fact that Nixon and FDR, both skilled rhetoricians, are diametrical opposites in ideology and in public memory. This study has nothing to do with the dogs themselves though the familiarity of their names makes them seem like acquaintances. This study examines the rhetorical artfulness of Nixon and FDR in creating dog-themed narratives to mask and transform partisan political attacks into evocative emotion-laden appeals.

The connections between “Checkers” and “Fala”—the speeches—and their shared rhetorical history have received little scholarly comment. Each speech is well-known within the discipline. Connections between the two famous addresses have not been noted, much less examined, in the scholarly literature I have investigated. This article transcends the notion of these speeches as merely coincidental or thematically similar in order to seriously investigate the rhetorical theory embedded and demonstrated in these two events. When and how were these two animals’ names invoked in the respective speeches and with what result? What can the artfulness of these seemingly banal animal allusions tell us about political rhetoric?
Background

The “Checkers” speech was given on September 23, 1952; Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Campaign Address to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers” (much better known as “the Fala speech”) was delivered on the same date in 1944. Less than a decade—eight years—separates these two landmark speeches; in hindsight, the political eras in which they were given seem very different. The earlier speech occurred in the 1944 presidential campaign during World War II when the war’s outcome was not a settled matter; the second speech was given in the 1952 campaign at the dawn of the Cold War.

In describing Nixon’s preparation of his speech, historian Steven Ambrose (1988) suggests that the intervening period was a long time:

Nixon had a long memory and a nice sense of how to turn the tables. He recalled FDR’s line in the 1944 campaign about how his dog, Fala, had been left behind at an overseas conference and destroyer had been sent to the Aleutians to bring the dog back. FDR had responded to Republican cries of outrage by saying, “The Republicans were not content to attack me, or my wife, or my sons. No, not content with that, now they even attack my little dog, Fala.” Nixon had an idea about how to turn that one back around again. (p. 285)

Ambrose is the only source asserting that Fala was, in fact, left behind and collected by a naval vessel. In extensive research on Fala’s public performances as FDR’s sidekick, there has been no confirmation of the charge and a multitude of denials. Black (2003) reports, “Admiral Leahy, on behalf of the navy, officially confirmed to Speaker Rayburn and Majority Leader McCormick that the charge was unfounded” (p. 1001).

While Ambrose suggests that Nixon needed a long memory to recall the Fala speech, eight years is not a long time in an adult life. Richard Nixon was an astute observer of political rhetoric; it is not at all surprising that he remember FDR’s speech. The larger and more interesting questions are how and why he constructed a parallel instance in an address given to save his political career. Nixon offers some brief clues in his memoirs and in Six Crises.

To get the actual remarks on the record, here are the salient portions of each speech. The Republicans intimated through Congressman Knutson that Roosevelt had squandered government funds in the Fala recovery exercise. In addressing the Teamsters that Saturday night, Roosevelt noted:

These Republican leaders have not been content with attacks on me, or my wife, or on my sons. No, not content with that, they now include my little dog, Fala. Well, of course, I don't resent attacks, and my family doesn't resent attacks, but Fala does resent them. You know, Fala is Scotch, and being a Scottie, as soon as he learned that the Republican fiction writers in Congress and out had concocted a story that I had left him behind on the Aleutian Islands and had sent a destroyer back to find him—at a cost to the taxpayers of two or three, or eight or twenty million dollars—his Scotch soul was furious. He has not been the same dog since. I am accustomed to hearing malicious falsehoods about...
myself—such as that old, worm-eaten chestnut that I have represented myself as indispensable. But I think I have a right to resent, to object to libelous statements about my dog. (Rosenman, 1950, p. 289)

It is axiomatic that the Checkers speech saved Nixon’s political career. It is less well-known that the Fala speech fulfilled a similar function by demonstrating FDR’s renewed campaign vigor. In the summer of 1944, rumors questioned his health and fitness for another term. Thomas Dewey was campaigning energetically and effectively. FDR’s sub-par campaign address in Bremerton, Washington on August 12th seemed to confirm the rumors. He gave the speech standing, something he had not done for a year; his braces did not fit correctly due to his significant weight loss. Bremerton was not an effective performance.

Six weeks later in the Fala speech, FDR demonstrated that he was back in fighting trim—energetically upbraiding and making fun of Republicans and reinforcing the accomplishments of his administrations. The health and fitness rumors were laid to rest. In November he won reelection with 54% of the popular vote; five months later, he was dead.

Nixon’s remarks were given in a live television performance without precedent in American politics. As the 1952 campaign was taking shape, Nixon was accused of having a “slush fund,” and many voices in the Republican Party were calling for him to step aside to preserve Eisenhower’s chances of winning the presidency. Others found in this charge a convenient opportunity to rid the ticket of a candidate that they had never favored. It soon came to light that the Democratic presidential nominee, Adlai Stevenson, had a larger fund that was unaudited and run by the candidate himself rather than by a trustee (Jamieson, 1996, p. 74).

Nixon’s Checkers performance was a tour de force that invented the televised apologia, saved his place on the ticket, and made it clear he was a gifted and inventive rhetorician. While televised performances by politicians are now commonplace, Tom Wicker (1991) set Nixon’s actions in the context of the times: “In 1952 it was a sensational thing to do” (p. 95). This speech was judged the sixth most significant speech by an American in the 20th century in a survey of 137 public address scholars (Lucas & Medhurst, 2007). In these rankings it is surpassed by only Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream,” John Kennedy’s Inaugural, FDR’s First Inaugural and Pearl Harbor address, and Barbara Jordan’s keynote address to the 1976 Democratic National Convention.

Without this successful defense of his character in 1952, Nixon would not have been in any position to run for president in 1960, and subsequently to win in 1968. The speech was both a career-saving performance and a point of persistent ridicule for Nixon. He conveys the ambivalent dimension of the Checkers’ legacy in his 1962 book, Six Crises:

A distinguished political science professor, after making a thorough study of the 1960 election, stated his considered judgment that if it had not been for the fund broadcast I would have been elected President of the United States. It was a neat theory, brilliantly supported by facts and figures, but like most classroom theoreticians he had not faced up to the hard reality of the alternative. If it hadn’t been for that broadcast, I would never have been around to run for the presidency. (p. 129)
On that Tuesday in September, Nixon spoke in a rented Hollywood theater, the El Capitan, which had been converted to a television studio. Its 750 seats were empty; media watched a feed in a nearby room. Nixon spoke to an empty hall and “before the largest audience in the history of mankind” (Ambrose, 1988, p. 284). After much talk of accountants, legal opinions, and the inner workings of Congressional offices, Nixon noted:

One other thing I probably should tell you, because if I don't they will probably be saying this about me, too. We did get something, a gift, after the election. A man down in Texas heard Pat on the radio mention the fact that our two youngsters would like to have a dog, and, believe it or not, the day before we left on this campaign trip we got a message from Union Station in Baltimore, saying they had a package for us. We went down to get it. You know what it was?

It was a little cocker spaniel dog, in a crate that he had sent all the way from Texas, black and white, spotted, and our little girl Tricia, the six year old, named it Checkers.

And you know, the kids, like all kids, loved the dog, and I just want to say this, right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we are going to keep it. (Wicker, 1991, p. 98)

**Connections Between the Speeches**

Are the two speeches intentionally connected? Nixon endorses the claims of Ambrose. He leaves no doubt as he speaks to the linkages, although cryptically: “Thinking back to Franklin Roosevelt’s devastating remark in the 1944 campaign – ‘and now they are attacking poor Fala’—I decided to mention my own dog Checkers. Using the same ploy as FDR would irritate my opponents and delight my friends, I thought” (Nixon, 1962, p. 103). Wicker (1991) echoes this view: “Remembering Franklin Roosevelt’s devastating use of his ‘little dog Fala’ to torment Republicans in 1944, Nixon decided with a certain malicious humor to turn the tables and refer to his own dog – Checkers” (p. 95).

FDR’s famed advisor and speechwriter, Samuel Rosenman, completed the draft of the Teamsters remarks. He brought them to the president for his final review. While there was a distinguished stable of speechwriters supporting Roosevelt, he was actively involved in the crafting of his messages. FDR reviewed and analyzed multiple drafts; he knew them nearly by heart when it came time to deliver them. The Teamsters/Fala speech is no exception. In fact, Rosenman makes clear that FDR was the originator and author of the Fala passage. Rosenman notes that while he was preparing an initial draft during a Maine vacation, FDR was attending the second Quebec conference where he drafted and sent along the Fala portion from his own pen “just as a happy thought” (Rosenman, 1952, p. 473). Neither Rosenman nor FDR foresaw just how successful the speech and its signature passage would be. Rosenman called it FDR’s best political campaign speech that precipitated a groundswell of campaign energy: “Bremerton was forgotten” (Rosenman, 1952, p. 478).
The central device of the Fala speech—biting ridicule through humor—was one that FDR artfully practiced. In the 1940 campaign he had energized crowds with the refrain of “Martin, Barton and Fish” as he named—and then denounced—three Republican congressmen impeding the implementation of the New Deal. Audiences would chant the names as Roosevelt presented a litany of their shortcomings.

What do Nixon and FDR gain by speaking of, or even through, their pets? There are three benefits to this device: delivering ridicule or defense through humor or pathos, softening partisanship, and labeling with memorable names. The mechanism of alluding to the dog enables FDR and Nixon to make their opponents appear ridiculous without requiring that the speaker be hard-edged in doing so. FDR points to Fala to decry the charges of Congressman Knutson and condemn the motives of Republican critics (“No, not content with that, they now include my little dog, Fala”). Nixon recounts the story of Checkers to ridicule his critics for hounding him (“One other thing I probably should tell you . . .”). His ostensible targets are Democrats and an aggressive media, but Nixon knew that some Republican factions were after his scalp as well.

**Benefits of this Strategy**

In each instance, the dog narrative evokes a warm and fuzzy image thus softening the edge of the speaker’s partisan denunciation of his accusers. Positioning the pet as the victim of critics’ charges takes the politician and his actions out of the spotlight and allows him to denounce the attackers while making the charges themselves seem ludicrous (e.g., the charge that FDR was free-wheeling with government prerogatives is condensed to the claim that the Navy was sent to rescue Fala; the accusation that Nixon had taken improper benefits as a public servant becomes a move to take away a child’s pet). Thus the vehicle of the pet gives the speaker special leverage with the charges. He can reduce their scope, suggest their absurdity, and then dismiss them with homey pet-based reasoning (e.g., Fala is infuriated at the charges and the Nixon family is keeping Checkers no matter what).

The final benefit is in the naming of the speeches. Neither rhetor selected the names that have been applied through history but both speakers did select the stories that made those names possible. History has applied the dogs’ names—in themselves cute and harmless—as the enduring shorthand labels for these speeches. Nixon had ambivalent feelings about the speech and yet he celebrated its anniversary every year (Ambrose, 1988, p. 295). He often called it the “Fund Speech” though he grudgingly acknowledged the name “Checkers” as well. “It was labeled as the ‘Checkers speech’ as though the mention of my dog was the only thing that saved my career,” Nixon wrote (1962, p. 125).

The ultimate rhetorical fact is that the Checkers speech is not about Checkers and the Fala speech is not about Fala. Both speeches are full of the rough and tumble of partisan political discourse and yet they abide in history and the public memory with soft, furry, innocuous names. It is as if the historical event of the speech has itself been made our pet; we
recall political arguments through memories of cold noses and wagging tails, not bared fangs. That fact cushions a stark reality: Roosevelt and Nixon were doing partisan political business in these speeches and fighting for their political lives. Despite his avowed distaste for the “Checkers” label, what would Nixon have preferred his remarks be called? The “I-am-not-a-crook” address? “The it’s-not-really-a-slush-fund” speech? Would Roosevelt have selected “denouncing the Republicans” or “I am not over the hill” as the label for his address? The naming of these speeches serves the very important function of sanitizing and domesticating these intensely partisan arguments through the synecdoche of the pets.

This impact of the name of a speech is reminiscent of public perceptions of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Speaking of civil rights, King clearly charges, “America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned” (Hansen, 2003, p. 53). King’s speech accuses American society of breaking promises and turning its back on Blacks; it calls on the nation to “live out the true meaning of its creed.” However, it is much more palatable and politically calming for society to remember this speech through the image of a dream rather than through the image of a bounced check. The “defanged” dream label allows Americans to embrace and celebrate King and the speech while blithely ignoring the harsh realities he described. Similarly, Roosevelt and Nixon could be hard-hitting and partisan in their remarks while veiling that partisanship with a dog-based anecdote laden with pathos. Thus the speakers obliquely rebut the charges against them, allowing the listeners to “laugh it off” (for FDR) or “cry it off” (for Nixon).

Even without the dog stories, both speeches were long on pathos. FDR’s address brought the room (and many others hearing it) to an emotional pitch: “The audience loved it. They howled, clapped and cheered;” even the president’s daughter, Anna, had tears in her eyes (Goodwin, 1994, p. 549). Nixon’s public performance famously ended with him burying his face into Bill Knowland’s shoulder and sobbing in relief (Ambrose, 1988). Those were hardly the only tears evoked by “Checkers.” As candidate Eisenhower watched the speech from the safe distance of Cleveland, his wife, Mamie, sat near him sobbing; in the El Capitan Theater members of the camera crew who had broadcast the remarks were tearful as well (Wicker, 1991).

How These Speeches Work

The rhetorical critic seeks to understand exactly what is going on in and between these two addresses. There is a clear historic link; Nixon acknowledges as much. There is the memorable thematic overlap: family dog as political touchstone. There is the rhetorical effect of these speeches: each saved a politician and a presidency.

It is logical to begin an analysis with Lloyd Bitzer’s (1968) foundational concept of the rhetorical situation: “the nature of those contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse” (p. 1). Two other elements of Bitzer’s formulation are significant as well. The exigence is “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (Bitzer, p. 6). Ideally, the exigence found in
the rhetorical situation should evoke a “fitting response,” one that “meets the requirements established by the situation” (Bitzer, p. 10). Bitzer concludes with rhetoric’s philosophical justification: “it provides principles, concepts, and procedures by which we effect valuable changes in reality” (p. 14). In these two speeches there were exigencies: Roosevelt was rumored to have lost his edge as a campaigner and Nixon was accused of being corrupt. The speakers’ reversals of these harrowing situations, turning challenges into stunning triumphs, confirm the quality of these responses and the value of examining them.

Studying the speeches and the historical record of the reactions to them brings many terms to the analysis: banality, triviality, pathos, ridicule, sentimentality, jejune, saccharine, maudlin, anthropomorphism. All of these terms merit brief descriptions from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2010): banality—lacking in originality, obvious, boring; triviality—of little value, trifling or unimportant; pathos—a quality that evokes pity or sadness; ridicule—the subjection of someone or something to mockery or derision; sentimentality—excessive tenderness, sadness or nostalgia; jejune—wanting in substance or solidity, especially in speech or writing; saccharine—excessively sweet or sentimental; maudlin—characterized by shallow sentimentality, mawkishly emotional; and, anthropomorphism—the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to a god, animal or object.

How do these terms shape our understanding of “Fala” and Checkers”? For all of their commonalities, in a fundamental way these speeches differ. FDR attacks his Republican accusers and the entire party in his remarks. He goes on the offensive and stays there. Nixon, on the other hand, gives a speech of explanation in which the attacks on Democrats, and on some Republicans, are much more oblique. The general viewer hears the story of the “respectable Republican cloth coat;” astute observers of both parties see a skilled rhetorician create and master a form in real time. Nixon proves himself to be a man to be reckoned with under all circumstances.

Roosevelt delivers the essence of his ridicule of the Republicans through the putative emotional responses of Fala. By anthropomorphizing Fala into the vehicle for his disdain for Republican actions and policies, he deepens the mockery and derision. He claims that the party is attacking the dog and the dog finds their actions infuriating and absurd. What would be a conventional political denunciation is put into the mouth of a popular pet so as to render his opponents laughingstocks.

While FDR and his dog are attacking, Nixon is trying to hold his ground (and position). Contemporary and historical commentaries on “Checkers” have described it as sentimental to the point to being mawkish or maudlin. Commentators suggest it is beneath the standing for a public figure to give such a demeaning performance. As Nixon later pointed out, without this speech he would have ceased to be a public figure on the national stage. The story of acquiring the Cocker Spaniel puppy and the family’s determination to keep a child’s pet seemed to go too far down a tear-stained path. The image may be unsophisticated but it is also, like a denunciation by a Scottish terrier, unassailably powerful. Nixon laid out his family finances and his humble origins
to win the public’s support; then he won it again by refusing to offer up the puppy on the altar of his critics. Maudlin it may have been; Nixon achieved every goal he sought through “Checkers.”

So are these speeches actually banal? Would that judgment make Roosevelt or Nixon any less effective? Skillful rhetoric works with the materials at hand. In these cases, stories about dogs were crafted into speeches that saved presidencies. Banality is not the issue, rhetorical artistry is.

**Limits of Pathos**

While pathos can be a powerful tool, the issue remains: how much pathos is enough and, more importantly, how much is too much? Roosevelt and Nixon produced brief and remarkably similar pathetic appeals. The power of the dogs’ names and their depoliticizing effects are further reinforced by the awareness that the memorable passages in these two speeches are quite brief: only five percent of FDR’s remarks (164 of 3181 words) and three percent of Nixon’s (171 of 4625 words). Both speeches dealt with many more topics than mere references to cute animals, and yet it is by the snippets alone that they are known and remembered. It is further remarkable that these two brief passages are virtually identical in length. What gives this brevity its power? Perhaps their effect in leavening a partisan attack is enough; the pathos is a respite from the gritty business at hand. Conversely, too much pathos entails risk: a political speech becomes a soap opera and the speaker, a weakling.

A related observation examines where within these speeches the core of pathos is found. When is the right time to “be cute” in a political speech? Again, there is a striking similarity between the two speeches. Both animal stories come after the half-way point of the speech and before the three-quarter point. In fact, Fala is discussed when 72% of the speech has been delivered (2310 words out of 3181); Checkers arises at the 60% mark (2767 words out of 4625). This similarity might be coincidental but it seems strategically sound to do more than half of the serious work of the speech, bring in an enlivening anecdote, and then conclude with the serious policy matters. It is hard to imagine either speech being as effective with the anecdote located close to the beginning or the end. Used too early in the speech, the story could seem flippant. Putting it too close to the end could render the conclusion too light-hearted, blunting the serious points being made. These two experienced and savvy speakers used anecdotes of nearly identical length and located them in virtually the same place in the flow of the respective speeches.

**Conclusions**

Perhaps the anecdote is not merely an anecdote but also a distillation of the speaker’s entire argument as well as a form of “comic relief” for the heavy ideological tone in the speech. The “Fala” story asserts that the Republicans are misguided and have stooped to slandering a family pet. The “Checkers” passage implies that Nixon’s critics are wrong on the facts and
would stoop to taking away the children’s pet. So the rhetors have reinforced the larger points of their addresses through touching anecdotes; the stories are presented off-handedly and seem to be side-bars but they are doing exactly what the larger speech intends through a cunning use of emotional appeal.

The similarities between these two speeches include their prominence in public memory, their featuring of dogs as rhetorical centerpieces, and their depth of pathos. It seems likely that there is a synergy among these elements. In addition, the portions of the two speeches that highlight the dogs are notably similar in length and placement. Two instances do not establish a pattern but do suggest a logic for the use and placement of pathetic elements.

There are also some differences worth noting. Checkers’ fame was rooted in these remarks and the dog itself had no real public persona. The Checkers show opened and closed on the same night though it was a hit while it lasted. Checkers stood for any dog and children’s affection for it.

In contrast, Fala’s role with FDR has unique features in American political history. He came to the first family in 1940, when FDR had already been president for two terms. Like a character added to an established television series to offer new plot lines, Fala became a resource for stories of whimsy and warmth. Fala was a sidekick, a jester, and a mascot for the president. He was a public figure in his own right: discussed ten times in presidential press conferences and mentioned 31 times in the *New York Times*. He starred in a 1942 movie that is still shown at the Hyde Park National Memorial. This level of popularity made it possible for Roosevelt not only to mention Fala but also to cast him as a character in a melodrama of outrageous Republican charges (“... his Scotch soul was furious. He has not been the same dog since.”) much to the public’s delight.

When Fala died, (he was in fact put down to end suffering), the story and his picture ran on the front page of the *New York Times* (“Fala ‘Sleeps Away’,” 1952, p. 1). President Truman’s firing of Attorney General J. Howard McGrath led the news that day. Fala’s story ran in the lower left corner, next to an account of a lieutenant, the son of the general under whom he served, who had been shot down and was feared lost in Korea. Fala’s burial was covered the next day on page 27. He was buried at his master’s feet (“Fala Buried,” 1952, p. 27). When the sculpture at the Roosevelt Memorial on the Mall in Washington was dedicated in 1997, it depicted FDR seated with Fala nearby, at his feet.

It is fair to conclude that Fala, the animal, had a life before and after becoming Fala, the campaign symbol—embodiment of anti-Republican fury. In contrast, Checkers was a prop in Nixon’s address, not unlike Pat Nixon herself, though without an on-camera role. Having served his function, Checkers, the apotheosis of self-pitying sentimentality, “faded away” from the public mind. The public lives of Fala and Checkers were as distinct as those of their respective masters. Nevertheless, both dogs served as the narrative bedrock for Roosevelt and Nixon whose skillful use of them produced messages that turned a Scottish terrier and a Cocker Spaniel into rhetorical lifesavers. None of these developments would have been possible without the opening created by Congressman Harold Knutson’s allusion to the rumor of the Fala rescue operation.
This Minnesota politician inadvertently sparked two prominent moments in the rhetoric of American presidents. Franklin Roosevelt’s skill as a political counter-puncher turned Knutson’s charge into rich political fodder; Richard Nixon watched FDR and learned a lesson that saved his political career.

References


Fala buried in Hyde Park Garden at feet of friend and champion. (1952, April 7). *New York Times*, p. 27.


-------------------

**Author’s Note**

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to John Llewellyn, Department of Communication, Post Office Box 7347, Winston Salem, NC 27109. E-mail: llewelly@wfu.edu
Explaining the Revolution: Vernacular Discourse and the Tipping Point in America’s 2006 Midterm Election

Ryan Michael Shepard
Doctoral Candidate
rshepard@ku.edu
Department of Communication Studies
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS

ABSTRACT
The 2006 midterm election marked perhaps the first time that the American public held the Bush administration accountable for its controversial actions. Various explanations have been offered for the backlash, ranging from public concern about the war to disgust over sex scandals involving prominent conservatives. In this essay, through analysis of vernacular discourse appearing in letters to the editor from USA Today, I argue that the election results stemmed from Bush’s weakening credibility – in respect to the dimensions of honesty, competence, and moderation – which limited the effectiveness of his rhetoric that was so powerful since September 11th.

America’s midterm election of November 2006 resulted in a stunning victory for the Democratic Party. Democrats gained thirty-one seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, five seats in the Senate, and ultimately gained control of Congress for the first time since 1994. The election was also the first time that voters held President Bush accountable, albeit through punishing his political party, for his administration’s perceived shortcomings. The reason for this backlash remains contested. When asked about a possible tipping point, some Republican strategists were quick to suggest that the election results signified only temporary frustration with the GOP. For instance, Karl Rove, just days after the election, reported, “Iraq mattered, [but] it was more frustration than it was an explicit call for withdrawal” (Allen, 2006). Instead, Rove argued in pointing to several political scandals unrelated to the administration’s policies, “The profile of corruption in the exit polls was bigger than I’d expected. Abramoff, lobbying, Foley and Haggard added to the general distaste that people have for all things Washington, and it just reached critical mass” (Allen, 2006). Others disagreed with Rove. Arianna Huffington (2006), for example, claimed “there were three reasons why Democrats won, and they are Iraq, Iraq, and Iraq.” Conservative journalist Robert Novak (2006) concurred, suggesting that opposition to the war had “produced a virulent anti-Republican mood.” In reality, though, both of these evaluations are too simplistic.

Individual political crises themselves do not explain the outcome of the 2006 midterm election. The president’s first six years in office were defined by numerous scandals and policy
failures. Whether it was an unpopular war, the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, perceived infringement upon civil liberties, the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, growing corporate and political corruption, an energy policy out of control, inaction in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, or a growing gap between the rich and poor, there were a number of reasons for the public’s diminishing faith in President Bush. Collectively, these shortcomings—in addition to economic conditions that created a bankruptcy boom and an electorate looking for someone to blame—seem to explain why the overall trajectory of public opinion during this period, captured by most polls, indicated a growing sense of frustration with the president after 2003. From record public approval ratings as high as eighty-eight percent in November 2001, according to the FOX News/Opinion Dynamics poll, the president’s numbers dropped steadily to seventy percent by July 2002, sixty percent by January 2003, fifty percent by September 2003, and crashed to the lower forties and mid-thirties by the winter months of 2006.

While Bush’s controversial policies and involvement in major scandals may have led to widespread frustration with his administration, his rhetoric kept him afloat. Several scholars have noted that Bush’s post-9/11 rhetoric succeeded in maintaining strong support for his administration because his party controlled the framing of major political issues (Lakoff, 2004), and his discourse demonized his opponents and manipulated the public’s fear (Bostdorff, 2003; Domke, 2004; Gunn, 2004; Ivie, 2004; Jewett & Lawrence, 2003; Lakoff & Frisch, 2006; Murphy, 2003). Consequently, Bush won his bid for reelection, and few people supported later calls for his impeachment or censuring. Although the president weathered the storm many times before, however, the election of 2006 signaled that his rhetoric, once amazingly successful, had finally stopped working. Since his political shortcomings alone do not explain this phenomenon, this essay offers an alternative explanation suggesting that the cumulative impact of Bush’s political failures severely limited his rhetorical resources in convincing the public to stay the course with him and his party.

In this essay, through analysis of vernacular discourse in the form of letters to the editor from USA Today, I argue that President Bush’s rhetoric became ineffective and that the Republican Party was subsequently held accountable by voters who grew increasingly nervous about an ideological agenda that pushed a conservative worldview apparently at any cost. At the root of the public backlash, and Bush’s inability to continue successfully defending his actions, were growing problems with the president’s credibility. These problems related to three dimensions of his ethos: honesty, competence, and moderation. Thus, public opinion of Bush went from idolization of the wartime leader to resentment of his involvement in scandals, and unyielding commitment to failed foreign and domestic policy. In short, it was not Bush’s neo-conservative worldview that led the electorate to punish Republicans, rather it was the growing belief among voters that his destructive leadership style would doom the country. With Bush’s ethos damaged, doubts clearly grew about the agenda that he and his party represented.

My argument develops, first, with a discussion about the importance of understanding public opinion through vernacular discourse. Additionally, I explicate how letters to the editor, in particular, might help critics understand the shift in any kind of public opinion, but especially
about the Bush administration in 2006. Second, in analyzing four important months of letters to the editor published in *USA Today*, I trace a trajectory of public opinion focused on Bush’s credibility. I argue that the public, supportive overall in May 2003 within a year became more concerned about the president’s honesty and competence in dealing with Iraq. By October 2005, I contend, this concern transformed into clear frustration with all aspects of Bush’s credibility. Analysis of letters from October 2006 demonstrates further that perceptions of the administration’s unrealistic commitment to a failed agenda had turned most Americans against the president. Finally, I close with a discussion of the implications of this study.

**Vernacular Discourse and Tipping Points in Public Opinion**

Explaining how the Bush administration’s rhetoric became ineffective in evading responsibility requires an understanding of how the majority of Americans eventually grew more concerned about the leadership of the former hero of the post-9/11 world. Thus, this section explicates how theories about “tipping points” in social and political movements are helpful in comprehending sudden swings in public opinion similar to what occurred leading up to November 2006, and also how analysis of what Gerard Hauser and others called “vernacular discourse” gives critics greater access to the complicated thoughts of the politically engaged citizens behind these swings. Additionally, I suggest that letters to the editor in major newspapers are an excellent source – despite their shortcomings – for reading vernacular discourse regarding hotly debated issues, and I then describe the nature of the texts analyzed in the rest of this essay.

One way of analyzing sudden changes in public opinion is through the theory of the tipping point, which has probably been most clearly presented by Malcom Gladwell. A tipping point, Gladwell (2000) argued, “is the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point” (p. 12). Tipping points are what lead to the mysterious emergence of any social trend, including fashion fads, the surge in the number of teenage smokers, the rise and fall of crime waves, or strong opinions about government. According to Gladwell, these trends are similar to epidemics, for “ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do” (p. 7). Because beliefs and attitudes are contagious, therefore, social trends can be caused by little events, and spread quickly. Explaining the complicated causes behind trends in public opinion and behavior, Gladwell identified three factors that lead to tipping points. First, in describing what he called “the law of the few,” Gladwell suggested that tipping points are triggered by the actions of just a handful of people. “When it comes to epidemics,” Gladwell noted, “a tiny percentage of people do the majority of the work” (p. 19). Certain people have enormous power because they are perceived as being knowledgeable, energetic, and sociable (p. 21). Second, in explaining “the stickiness factor,” Gladwell stated that tipping points are caused when messages are made memorable, usually through simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information (p. 25). Third, Gladwell highlighted the importance of context, and suggested that people often drastically alter their behavior in response to the smallest changes in their immediate situation (p. 29).
Tipping point theory is especially useful in the study of social movements because it sometimes clarifies when and how certain ideas mobilize the masses. Rhetoric scholars have described the development of social movements in several ways. Leland Griffin (1952), for instance, suggested that movements start with a period of inception in which certain sentiments “flower into public notice” or when a controversial event “immediately creates a host of aggressor rhetoricians” who initiate a movement (p. 186). According to Griffin, this stage is followed by a second characterized by “rhetorical crisis” when the movement succeeds in disturbing the balance of the status quo, and a third stage characterized by a period of consummation in which the aggressor rhetoricians abandon their efforts (p. 186). In expanding this framework, Stewart, Smith, and Denton (2001) identified five stages in the development of movements. Movements, they argued, start with a genesis stage in which restless individuals convene because of shared concerns about problems with some institution, followed by a stage of social unrest when the group becomes more visible to the public. The third stage, marked by enthusiastic mobilization, occurs when the movement is highly active and optimistic, and gains legitimacy from widespread support. According to Stewart, Smith, and Denton, social movements then enter a fourth stage in which they maintain a quieter, more stable presence that is eventually followed by a final stage bringing their termination.

Interestingly, though rhetoric scholars can agree on the basic life cycle of social movements, they admit that they cannot always identify the key moments that trigger the earliest stages. As Stewart and his colleagues suggested, “We rarely know when a social movement begins – only that it evolved in particular ways” (p. 130). At most, these scholars noted, at some point “individuals view an imperfection as a serious problem that is likely to grow more severe unless appropriate institutions address it quickly and earnestly” (p. 130). It is usually not until a “triggering incident” that the “generally unorganized, ideologically uncertain, and barely visible social movement” advances to the next stage (p. 132). According to these scholars, this triggering incident is not always possible to identify “until we have time to observe the flow of history” (p. 148). In this respect, identifying tipping points is helpful in understanding the progression of social movements, and this identification is possible with certain methods of analysis that provide detailed focus on the thoughts of the politically engaged.

In determining the tipping point that led to anti-government attitudes and a Democratic victory in the 2006 midterm election, this essay focuses on public opinion as it emerged in vernacular discourse. There are three assumptions that guide the study of vernacular rhetoric. First, despite ongoing questions regarding how “the people” directly influence their political system, the study of vernacular voices emphasizes the idea that public opinion still matters. As Hauser (2004) stated

Even if democratic leaders do not actually rely on public discussion of the people's business to guide their political conduct, they treasure the political cachet of appeals to ‘the people,’ which reflects acknowledgment that their acts in some way require authorization. (p. 2)
Second, scholars calling for study of vernacular rhetoric also hold that traditional approaches to public opinion usually regurgitate the findings of polls and oversimplify the feelings of everyday citizens. On the limitations of polls, Hauser (1999) suggested, “Taken at face value they can be deceiving; weighed alone they offer a limited and sometimes superficial understanding of publics and what they believe” (p. 4). Polls offer only an abstract representation of public sentiment. Hauser cautioned, “We do not experience this public; we cannot interact with it, question its reasoning, or expect it to respond to our own reasoning” (p. 5). Third, as an alternative to traditional approaches to public opinion, analysis of vernacular rhetoric allows scholars to study the public sphere through observing “discourse as it actually transpires” (p. 109). These “vernacular dialogues, from which we extrapolate and interpret public opinions, discursively constitute their participants’ common understandings of reality” (p. 109). Vernacular voices represent not the public as “a general reference to a body of disinterested members of a society” (p. 14), but publics as “the interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse” (p. 31). According to Hauser, scholars who fail to study public dialogue “lose the narratives in which opinions are contextualized and which allow us to interpret the meaning of volunteered judgments” (p. 110). Attempting to capture these complex narratives, many recent studies have analyzed vernacular discourse in focus groups (Carlin et al., 2005), the internet and its many genres (Carlin et al., 2005; Gronbeck, 2004; Killoran, 2004; Schifino, 2006), school board meetings (McCormick, 2003), poems (Blitefield, 2004; Logan, 2004), public discussion clubs (Simons, 2004), talk radio (Eberly, 2004), and the courtroom (Dobyns, 2004).

Through examining letters to the editor in a politically moderate, nationally circulated newspaper, this essay answers the critical call for the study of discourse as it actually transpires. Letters to the editor have been chosen for the basis of my analysis because they are one of the best available sources to determine what politically active citizens – or what McGee (1975) refers to as “the people” – think about the president and the governing parties. Letters to the editor are notable because they are ripe with authentic opinion. Unlike those who respond to polls, authors of letters to the editor have more freedom to articulate their position on a variety of issues. More importantly, because letters to the editor appear consistently in newspapers, opinions may be compared over a period of time. As with polls, letters to the editor can indicate when opinions have changed, but unlike polls they contain explanations for why that change of heart has occurred.

Of course, letters to the editor have their own limitations in articulating public opinion. Previous studies have suggested that letters pages are a “concrete instance of mediated public debate” (Nielsen, 2010, p. 22) providing a window into the thoughts of a handful of writers who do not necessarily reflect general public opinion (Grey & Brown, 1970; Nielsen, 2010; Sigelman & Walkosz, 1992; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001; 2002a; 2002b). Letters often fail to represent “young adults, retired people, the unemployed, and those with less than average incomes” (Nielsen, p. 25), as well as many ethnic minorities and in some cases women (Singletary, 1976; Singletary & Cowling, 1979; Sparks & Perez, 1991; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002a). Despite editors’ best intentions,
sometimes letters are penned by special interest groups (Nielsen, 2010; Raeymaeckers, 2005; Reader, 2008; Richardson & Franklin, 2004). Additionally, “Editors have to sift through what is sometimes a trickle, usually a stream, and, depending on events, occasionally a flash flood of submissions, and construct from this the number of printed pages the organizational standards require” (Nielsen, p. 26). Editors therefore apply various subjective rules to select letters, pertaining to news value, relevance, entertainment, brevity, authority, and fairness (Nielsen, 2010; Raeymaeckers, 2005; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002b). Although some letters are not printed due to editorial bias (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002a), some studies have suggested that “rejected letters do not constitute a treasure trove of genuinely deliberative interventions screened out by shallow media gatekeepers. In general, they are much the same as what is printed, only longer, less well written, and more predictable” (Nielsen, p. 32). Moreover, Raeymaeckers (2005) noted, while “some editorial interventions are far from innocent,” “most editors confine themselves to shortening the readers’ letters and to touching up the vocabulary and grammar” (p. 219). Thus, while letters do not live up to ideal visions of deliberative democracy (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002b), they are still regarded by many scholars as strong indicators of issues the public cares about (Davis & Rarick, 1964; Hynds, 1991).

In the analysis that follows, I examine letters to the editor that appeared in USA Today. USA Today is an appropriate source because at the time of the 2006 election it had the largest circulation of any newspaper in the country with twice the number of subscribers as the Chicago Tribune, The Washington Post, and Los Angeles Times, and nearly one million more subscribers than The New York Times. Its circulation meant that letters to the editor appearing in the newspaper had a greater chance of representing beliefs across a greater region. Additionally, USA Today has been recognized as the major newspaper “closest to the center” in terms of journalism and public opinion, according to a study led by political scientist Tim Groseclose (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005, p. 1191; see also Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006, pp. 16-17).

Explaining the Democratic Revolution of 2006

Bush’s rhetoric ultimately failed to protect his administration and his party, I argue, because of growing public concern about his leadership style. In the following analysis, I trace the public’s backlash to Bush’s leadership through four months of letters to the editor that appeared in USA Today between May 2003 and October 2006. In particular, my focus on letters to the editor from the months of May 2003 and 2004, and October 2005 and 2006 is based on a number of observations. Tracking the public’s changing opinion of the Bush administration requires a comparison of those sentiments about the president when the public was largely enamored with him, and later when he was perceived as being a poor leader. Although it was not expected that each month’s letters would perfectly represent public opinion, it was assumed that themes related to issues where “feelings run unusually high” would produce a “rough correspondence between the aggregated opinions expressed in letters to the editor and those elicited in opinion polls” (Sigelman & Walkosz, 1992, p. 944). Thus, May 2003 was selected as
a month to represent the favorable impressions of Bush. In that month, according to the FOX News/Opinion Dynamics poll, the president celebrated an approval rating of sixty-five percent, and was generally held in high regard after announcing, under the now infamous “Mission Accomplished” banner, an end to major combat operations in Iraq. May 2004 was chosen because it was one of the first months in which the president’s approval ratings, as well as support for the war in Iraq, dipped under fifty percent. October 2005 was selected because the month represented the average of Bush’s approval ratings in the range of forty to forty-five percent. Finally, October 2006 was included because it was close to the election, and because it represented a period in which less than forty-percent of Americans approved of the president.

Overall, 711 letters were examined, and 216 were selected for more careful readings based on their direct references to the president, his administration, or his political party. Of those relevant letters, each month’s contributions were analyzed by the author for themes they had in common, related mostly to their praise or criticism of multiple aspects of Bush’s leadership. Notably, most of the letters could be identified as belonging in one category or the other. When the letters for each month were compared, an intriguing story emerged. As the following sections illustrate, a tipping point occurring between October 2005 and October 2006 led some of the president’s traditional supporters to alienate their leader. The tipping point came after a gradual slide in the president’s credibility with the public. Americans in May 2003, I argue, were skeptical about the president’s leadership and voiced concern about his lack of moderation in economic policies, but criticism was outweighed by patriotic fervor that called for an assumption of Bush’s competence and honesty. By May 2004 the president’s supporters still outnumbered his critics, but there was a growing sense of concern over the honesty and competence behind the war effort. It took only a year for the public, upset about Iraq and Hurricane Katrina, to express serious frustration with all aspects of the administration’s credibility. Analysis of letters from October 2006 demonstrate that due to perceptions of failure in Iraq, and the addition of the Ted Haggard and Mark Foley sex scandals on top of previous crises, the public had lost its trust in Republican leadership.

May 2003: A Time of Support

Of the 208 letters to the editor appearing in USA Today for the month of May 2003, forty-six concerned the president, his administration, or his political party. Of these forty-six, sixteen letters dealt mostly with idiosyncratic issues. Close examination of the thirty others uncovered four types of comments regarding the president’s credibility. With the conflict in Iraq going his way, and the end of major military operations announced, May 2003 represented a period of widespread support for the president. Some Americans criticized him for being dishonest and others disliked his position on tax cuts, but most writers praised Bush’s leadership.

High praise of the president’s leadership. In all, twelve of the letters concerning President Bush evaluated his leadership. Six letters expressed that he and his administration were
manipulative, though they were split in the degree to which they were critical. Little (2003), for instance, critiqued Bush for using the media to cover his theatrical landing on the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. Branscomb (2003), in discussing the administration’s manipulation of fear, drew a parallel between Nazi Germany and the United States. With less intensity, three other letters (Henley, 2003; Goodenow, 2003; Hege, 2003) suggested that the president lied to the American people on multiple occasions. However, letters praising Bush’s leadership, while not necessarily dwarfing the critics in number, were longer, more detailed, and more passionate.

Many Americans supported unconditional backing of the president because they were enamored with his decisive leadership. In all, six of the letters from May 2003 hailed Bush for his unwavering commitment. Beck (2003), for instance, wrote, “I'm a senior citizen, and it has been a long time since I've witnessed a leader like Bush, who says what he means and is comfortable about carrying out his word” (p. 10A). Rokavec (2003) added

The president had the courage to take a stand on an unpopular issue, the war with Iraq, [and] I am glad to be living in a country where my leader cares more about the rights of people than leaving behind a legacy. (p. 10A)

Addressing Bush’s skeptics, Chartrand (2003) stated, “I strongly support the Bush administration's noble efforts to secure our nation, and I am grateful the president has stood firm in the face of criticism” (p. 14A). Thus, Bush’s supporters praised him for his competence and moderation in making tough decisions.

Criticism of the president’s fiscal policy. Beyond the skepticism concerning his honesty and trustworthiness, nine out of ten letters regarding Bush’s economic policy expressed resentment toward him for proposing excessive tax cuts. Busto (2003) argued that the president lacked understanding of “how most Americans struggle” (p. 11A). Many others complained that the tax cuts were making the rich even richer (Gruener, 2003; Light, 2003; Moss, 2003), while the lower class faced cuts to several important social programs (Lewis, 2003; Luciano, 2003; Wilson, 2003). Additionally, some letters showed concern over a growing deficit perceived as harmful to America’s future (Hewitt, 2003). Therefore, despite support being high for Bush in May 2003, there was some frustration over his lack of moderation in fiscal matters.

Defining post-9/11 citizenship. Many letters in May 2003 suggested that the country’s political environment was not accepting of Bush’s opponents. Six of the forty-six letters to the editor from May 2003 defined ideal citizens as those who unconditionally supported the president. The letters argued that most criticism of the president was unfair, and that it originated from bitter liberals. Rokavec (2003) exclaimed, “I am so tired of people putting down President Bush” (p. 14A). Aukskalnis (2003) referred to critics as having “sour grapes” (p. 12A). Other letters argued that those critical of the president needed to move on. For example, Barba (2003) demanded, “Get over it. More than 70% of the country approves of Bush's performance, and I know several people who voted for Gore who now proclaim they are happy Bush is president” (p. 14A). Some labeled Sen. Robert Byrd’s criticism of Bush landing on the U.S.S. Abraham
Lincoln as disgraceful (Taft, 2003), while others more explicitly recommended that Byrd just suck it up and “honor our military men and women” (Jacobs, 2003, p. 10A).

**Faith in America’s war in Iraq.** The great deal of support that the president enjoyed in May 2003 makes sense because opinion regarding the war was largely positive at the time. Although there were not many letters in May 2003 addressing the war in Iraq, the three that were printed illustrated that critics were in the minority. Just one of the three was against the war. Santee (2003), in referencing the missing weapons of mass destruction, stated, “So it turns out we were not fighting and dying for our freedom after all, but instead we were there fighting and dying for the freedom of Iraqis” (p. 14A). However, public frustration over the missing WMD was far from reaching its climax. The remaining two letters regarding Iraq showed that many Americans were content because they believed that the war was over. Paulson (2003) suggested, “With the war in Iraq ending, it's time for Americans of every background to get busy doing whatever possible to get this economy moving forward” (p. 10A). Additionally, Rogers (2003) confessed, “I am glad the war in Iraq is close to an end. I had thought it was going to take years to finish. I also thought it would cost countless dollars and lives. Fortunately, I was wrong” (p. 14A). Public opinion concerning Bush’s honesty, competence, and moderation, then, was high especially because the war was seen as coming to a successful conclusion.

**May 2004: When the Public Began to Shift**

In the year following May 2003, the world was confronted with the awful truth that the war in Iraq was failing. In the summer of 2003, the president was accused of exaggerating military intelligence in making his case for the initial invasion. Additionally, the insurgency once described by Donald Rumsfeld as “small networks of ten to twenty people” was wreaking havoc on the Middle Eastern state (“Rumsfeld blames,” 2003). Consequently, letters to the editor in May 2004 demonstrated a slight shift in public opinion and marked the early formation of a trajectory focused on the president’s credibility. Of the 178 letters to the editor from May 2004, sixty-eight concerned the president. Of these sixty-eight, thirteen dealt with a number of unrelated issues. The fifty-five others showed a new direction in public opinion. In short, many writers were becoming a little more skeptical about Bush’s honesty and competence, especially after the Abu Ghraib scandal, and many were also concerned about Bush’s handling of the war in Iraq. Despite the shift in opinion, the president’s overall leadership was still widely praised.

**Citizenship revisited.** While letters in May 2003 called for unconditional support of the president in a time of war, the mood changed a year later. Of the sixty-eight letters, five discussed the role of citizens in the post-9/11 world. A few suggested that questioning Bush’s policies was acceptable. Powers (2004) thanked *USA Today* for running photos of fallen soldiers so that the public could “understand that they are the ones who have paid war's price” (p. 12A). Carbonaro (2004), in justifying criticism of the war, contended “I have every sympathy and
concern for the soldiers and their families, but I also think they should not have been sent in harm's way in the first place” (p. 12A). Other writers (Moses, 2004; Nelson, 2004; Sabater, 2004) attacked USA Today for publishing photographs of fallen soldiers, and described the coverage as sensationalism at its worst. It is notable, however, that Bush’s supporters were no longer labeling all negative criticism as crazy liberal banter.

Public concern over Abu Ghraib. Over a third of the letters from May 2004 pertaining to Bush and the GOP related to the Abu Ghraib torture scandal. Although opinions were divided on the issue, the letters demonstrated how political crises started to erode the public’s confidence in the executive office. Eleven letters expressed support for the president and the troops in Iraq. Three arguments were apparent in these letters. First, some (Overholser, 2004) believed that the media was exaggerating the story. Second, other letters (Byers, 2004; Polfus, 2004; Walsh, 2004) argued that the crimes were committed by a few bad apples and had little to do with the Bush administration. Third, at least four of the letters (DiPentima, 2004; Novakovich, 2004; Quillen, 2004; Welch, 2004) characterized those tortured as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers who deserved the rough treatment. In short, these eleven letters suggested that the president was not at fault for the prisoner abuse.

Nearly half of the letters regarding Abu Ghraib, though, argued that the Bush administration was responsible for the crisis. At least four (Burris, 2004; Kaminski, 2004; Mastrangelo, 2004; Miller, 2004) stated that the abuse was the result of poor leadership and reflected larger problems with the administration’s lack of honesty and competence. Miller, for example, stated, “[Bush’s] claim that only a few U.S. soldiers are to blame is wrong” (p. 14A). Mastrangelo, in response to Bush’s claim that he did not receive warnings about ongoing mistreatment of prisoners, suggested, “To think that a Cabinet member could keep such a critical matter from Bush raises serious questions about Bush’s control and decisions in Iraq” (p. 12A). Four other letters (Gary, 2004; Gorman, 2004; Reed, 2004; Wiseman, 2004) implied that there was, or was going to be, a cover-up. Gary, for instance, complained that the corrective action promised by the government was too lenient. He stated:

As usual, the military brass doesn't get it. A reprimand is what I gave my daughter's boyfriend when I found that he'd been driving carelessly with her in the car. What I'd like to read is that the offenders got the severest form of prison time. (p. 14A)

Finally, a few other letters suggested that the president’s neglect of the scandal would fuel the cause of the terrorists and lead to more violence. On this point, Ingalls (2004) suggested, “Extremists in the Arab world – already inflamed over our prolonged occupation of an Arab country – will see this as ample reason to muster retaliation” (p. 11A). Thus, public criticism in response to Abu Ghraib illustrated that many Americans were willing to point fingers at Bush.

Growing frustration over Iraq. The number of letters generally addressing the war in Iraq increased substantially from May 2003 to May 2004. Of the sixty-eight letters regarding the Bush administration, twenty-five took a clear position on the war. The letters were divided
evenly. Half of the letters supported the president and the war. Some of those who wrote argued that the media coverage of the war was heavily biased against the president (Johnson, 2004; Ringling, 2004; Wrigley, 2004). Others (Larue, 2004) blamed Iraqis for the war’s failure to bring security to their country. A few more letters (Moutos, 2004; Warford, 2004) argued that the sacrifice in Iraq had been too great to pull out, regardless of the financial cost. In the same vein, many of these letters, six in all, claimed that the security of the world depended on success in Iraq. Summarizing this logic, Scott (2004) concluded, “Like it or not, we are fighting a religious war. If we do not keep the pressure on the terrorists, we will be inviting more attacks against the American civilian population” (p. 12A). Thus letters well into May 2004 called for the president to stay the course at any cost.

Nevertheless, just as many letters reflected frustration with the war. These letters blamed Bush for failures in Iraq, and made it clear that his credibility with a large portion of the public was severely damaged. Some critics accused the president of lying to the American people about evidence of WMD. Sartori (2006) contended, “From day one, our incompetent president has lied to us every step of the way to get the U.S. into a war we had no business entering into in the first place” (p. 14A). In labeling the sacrifice as wasteful, other critics suggested that the mounting death toll and potential civil war in Iraq were signs that American forces needed to come home. Bulmer (2004) clearly presented this perspective, writing, “We need to get out of Iraq now. Too many lives are being lost. The people there hate us, and the Muslim world will never embrace our form of democracy” (p. 20A). Admitting to excessive loss, even some Republicans decided that the war had failed. Bulmer (2004), for example, confessed, “As a lifelong Republican, I’ve always supported the party's candidate and policies. At one time, I supported President Bush. But all of that changed with the beheading of American hostage Nick Berg” (p. 20A). As another self-identified member of the GOP, Roberts (2004) called for the sacrifice to end, stating, “There is also no question as to who committed atrocities on prisoners in Afghanistan and Iraq -- we did. Where are the courageous Republican Party members now?” (p. 12A). Finally, some of the letters expressed frustration, not only in regards to the death toll, but with the president’s commitment to the same old strategies. This criticism accused Bush of failing to draft an effective long-term plan for the war. As Jones (2004) argued, “Staying the course is not the correct action. We haven't liberated anyone. If anything, we have brought more risk to our own country” (p. 8A). In short, although letters against the war were not yet outnumbering those in support, the public’s opposition by May 2004 was growing.

**Continued approval of Bush’s leadership.** While the public was becoming more frustrated with Bush, most of his traditional supporters still rallied behind him. Of the eleven letters addressing Bush’s leadership, eight expressed that he was an excellent president. Morrow (2004) claimed, “I believe Bush will go down as the greatest president in my lifetime. He has courage and bravado, and he sticks to right over wrong, regardless of the corruption of the rest of the world” (p. 20A). Additional letters (Loran, 2004; Minchin, 2004; Sterzinger, 2004; Sullivan,
2004) were not as optimistic, but still hailed the president for doing his best in a world that had become more complex after September 11th.

**October 2005: The Rise of Negative Public Opinion**

The seventeen months following May 2004 brought more crises to Bush’s doorstep. The war in Iraq was getting bloodier, and gas prices were skyrocketing. Additionally, the federal government’s botched emergency relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina opened the Bush administration to additional charges of incompetent leadership. Following the firing of FEMA director Michael Brown, praised just days earlier for his hard work, President Bush in his address from Jackson Square on September 15th accepted responsibility for the disaster. The apology did little to stop Bush’s public relations problem. By October 2005, letters regarding Bush focused narrowly on a few issues, and were far more negative than those letters from May 2003 and 2004. Of the 166 letters, forty-seven concerned the president, though twelve letters dealt with idiosyncratic political matters. The majority of the letters dealt with the themes of Iraq and Bush’s leadership, and voiced strong concern about his honesty, competence, and moderation.

**Vanishing support for the war.** Of the thirty-five letters regarding Bush, nine related to the war in Iraq. Of those nine, only three letters were supportive. Clifford (2005) reminded the world that “The media have too easily forgotten that the invasion was called ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom, not ‘Find those WMDs’” (p. 14A). Shurdut (2005) warned that withdrawal would encourage insurgents “to take over the Muslim world and then Israel” (p. 19A). Levy (2005) characterized the mission as a success because a despot had been removed, elections held, and a constitution approved. However, the letters published that were clearly against the war were double in number.

Most letters from October 2005 suggested that the president had lost credibility with the public. Scharpf (2005), for example, in countering Bush’s comparison of the war in Iraq to World War II, painted the sacrifice in other terms, concluding, “When I think of our involvement in Iraq, another less flattering conflict comes to mind: It starts with a ‘V’ and ends with a ‘nam’” (p. 14A). Others shared this view of the occupation as too long and costly. Gozlyn (2005) wrote that “tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed or wounded because of our failure” and that “an apology . . . to the world would be a big first step toward diffusing widespread anger and contempt over the Bush administration's legacy of torture, chaos, arrogant abuse of power and unnecessary loss of life” (p. 20A). Regarding Bush’s competence, Berg (2005) argued that the war failed, “because the Bush administration lacked the common sense to take into account the factional rivalries that threaten to split Iraq apart” (p. 19A). Despite failures, Bush pressed on, much to the chagrin of many Americans. As O’Leary (2005) argued, the illegal excursion into Iraq and undying commitment to the war made some feel like “fascism [was] just around the corner” (p. 14A).
Lost hope in Bush’s overall leadership. All ten letters directly evaluating Bush’s leadership in October 2005 criticized him for being dishonest, incompetent, and overly committed to failed policy. The most frequent criticism was that Bush, dishonest in his desire to work with international coalitions, too often went it alone, leaving his constituents to pay the price. Galal (2005) argued that Bush consistently undermined international law, treaties, and conventions. After Michael Brown’s mishaps following Hurricane Katrina, Larrabee (2005) called on the government to closely monitor all of Bush’s future nominations. As for Bush’s other controversial decisions, Beavers (2005) and Gilmore (2005) concluded that the president was driven by partisan motives and that he did not have the best interest of all Americans at heart. Bush was labeled an extremist, even by some who allegedly voted for him. Knapp (2005) admitted

I’m one diehard conservative who has had enough of President Bush. He came to power as the ‘great unifier,’ [but he] has never had the judgment, and he has now shown that he doesn't . . . have the political savvy to be an effective leader. (p. 20A)

In commenting on Bush’s tendency to push a one-party agenda, some writers implied that he worked with others only when forced. In regards to environmental policy, Fineberg (2005) suggested, “[Suddenly], he's changing his tune, saying we need to conserve. Why? [Not] because he has had an epiphany and become a true believer. No, it's only his plummeting approval ratings that have him switching messages” (p. 20A). Galloway (2005), who claimed that high fuel costs were hurting middle class families, agreed with this claim, calling Bush’s conservation talk “pathetic pandering” (p. 12A).

October 2006: The Tipping Point Becomes Apparent

Letters from October 2006 illustrated that support for the president had dwindled to its lowest point ever. Of the 159 letters printed that month, fifty-five concerned Bush. Notably, the letters accused the president of many kinds of failure. For instance, twelve letters discussed Bush’s immigration policy, with eleven evaluating the administration negatively. Of seven letters concerning health care in America, six complained that the current system left too many in despair. Additionally, six letters discussed the growing threat of Korea, which at the time was testing nuclear weapons. Five of those letters argued that the president’s pursuit of Iraq had made the world a more dangerous place. Throughout all of the letters were three common themes carrying over from previous months that suggested Bush, just a month from the midterm elections, had lost much of his credibility with voters.

Failure in Iraq. By October 2006, letters to the editor in USA Today were almost entirely negative about the war in Iraq. Of the fifteen letters, only three were supportive of Bush. In the twelve letters against the war, many wrote that Bush’s commitment to a failed strategy in Iraq was dangerous. In short, with Bush being described as obsessed, stubborn, and too powerful, he was under direct attack for lacking moderation. As some concluded, the Bush administration’s
relentless commitment to fight terrorists abroad had weakened the country. For example, Stosine (2006) stated, “Our armed forces are strained to a point where it's becoming clear to our growing, and increasingly united, enemies that we are likely losing the ability to ‘police’ or ‘enforce’ anything” (p. 12A). The root of the problem was Bush’s reluctance to change his strategy in the war on terrorism, some noted. Abernathy (2006), stating a popular belief, suggested, “We need to get out of Iraq now, so we can fight the war on terrorism” (p. 19A). Pointing out that Bush’s agenda had been tragically taken to the end of the line, Banks (2006) declared, “With a foreign policy that has undermined the credibility and security of the United States, it is no longer politically . . . acceptable to rubber stamp President Bush's call to ‘stay the course’ with regard to Iraq” (p. 12A). The solution in dealing with such a flawed leader, as many letters suggested, was to limit Bush’s power in the future. Kimberly (2006), for instance, stated, “We cannot do anything to change Bush and his administration. We can, however, deprive them of the power they now have and let new members of Congress attempt to clean up the mess they have made” (p. 19A).

**Political scandals further damage GOP credibility.** Karl Rove and Republican strategists were right in concluding that the sex scandals involving Haggard and Foley influenced voters in the days before the election. However, the six letters regarding the matter suggested that the scandals only solidified popular opinion that the Bush administration and Republicans were secretive, corrupt, and out of touch. Upset about the Foley scandal, Blue (2006) remarked, “Then we learn that the congressional leadership knew of the allegations months ago. That is not just appalling; it is intolerable” (p. 12A). Vermaas (2006) added

> If this were just about Foley himself, it might not have many repercussions for the GOP. But what is potentially fatal for the party's hopes in November is an alleged cover-up, where Republican congressional members potentially knew about this and did nothing for months. (p. 12A)

Galindo (2006), like many others, called for accountability and stated, “For all those who want our votes, stand before us and report what you did, what you learned and what you will do differently in the future. Tell us how you will be personally accountable to your constituents” (p. 12A).

**Overall frustration with Republican leadership.** Just weeks before the midterm elections, four letters evaluating Republican leadership characterized the majority as corrupt and out of touch. Ruga (2006), in writing about the GOP’s handling of a number of crises, argued, “Leaders who are this out of touch when confronted with facts that should lead reasonable people to obvious conclusions cannot be trusted to reach appropriate conclusions when faced with more complicated facts” (p. 21A). Stating what most independent voters likely felt, Ruga concluded, “I vote Democrat and Republican. I'll have to be much more careful now before I pull a Republican lever” (p. 21A). Echoing this frustration, Fredericks (2006), a military veteran who supported the war in Iraq, admitted
I have no confusion about why I was in Iraq, [but] I am confused about a Congress that votes based on personal self-interest, that can't seem to control our domestic borders and that spends more time trying to get elected with mud-slinging than selflessly defending the nation. (p. 21A)

Decker (2006) in attacking Republican spending during the campaign as evidence of the party’s ties to big business, asked, “Where is all the money coming from to pay for this disparity in ads? It comes from the pharmaceutical industry, the oil industry, the military/industrial complex, Wall Street, etc. In short, it is those who profit from Republican policies” (p. 12A). Thus, by October 2006 voters appeared increasingly agitated by the numerous signs of government corruption.

**Conclusion**

After a momentous election like that in 2006, it is not enough to analyze a sudden shift in public opinion by regurgitating data from exit polls. Public opinion is more complex than pundits pretend, and throughout this essay I have argued for the importance of examining vernacular discourse to understand the cause of tipping points. The tide of public opinion that swept so many Republicans out of office in November 2006, and cleared the way for Democrats to win the presidency in 2008, was not simply a reaction to the war in Iraq, or even a response to the sex scandals or lobbying corruption involving prominent conservatives. The election was a referendum on a presidential administration suffering a credibility crisis that was calcified sometime after Bush’s reelection in 2004.

This essay has several implications. Above all, it offers an explanation for the outcome of the 2006 midterm election that moves beyond simple punditry. The public turned on Republicans, and Bush’s rhetoric failed to maintain the support he enjoyed as a wartime leader, when the federal government’s failures after Hurricane Katrina raised serious concerns about the Bush administration’s competence, honesty, and moderation. Letters from May 2003 and later months showed that while Bush was losing popularity, a good number of politically active Americans still approved of his leadership. Eventually, however, the majority of letter writers characterized Bush as out of touch, and attacked the president for his deep commitment to poor domestic and foreign policy in addition to his involvement in several scandals.

Ultimately, the letters to the editor analyzed in this essay support the basic tenets of Gladwell’s theory of tipping points. In respect to the rule of the few, the difference between letters from May 2003 and later months was that moderate voters and even Republicans by October 2005 had apparently joined the attacks on Bush. As White (2005) elaborated, “Since winning reelection, Bush continued to shed independent and moderate support. On nearly every major issue presidential disapproval among independents and moderates [was] higher than the national average.” This was especially apparent when Republican candidates making public appearances tried to distance themselves from the Bush administration. Efforts to keep away from Bush were so strategic, Epstein (2006) reported, that all photographs of the president were removed from most Republican candidates’ websites, and fundraising alongside Bush occurred.
only behind closed doors. In short, the dive in public approval started once conservatives joined moderates in criticizing Bush.

In respect to what Gladwell referred to as the power of context, the letters became more negative only after Bush encountered crises in addition to the failures surrounding the war in Iraq. The administration’s credibility was so severely damaged, especially after Hurricane Katrina, that Bush lost the benefits of being a wartime president. Instead of being given the benefit of the doubt time and time again, the public began linking Bush’s political shortcomings to his character. As White (2005) claimed, the country eventually had two images of the president:

The first is his 2001 stance atop the ruins of the World Trade Center holding a bullhorn and telling a crowd of firefighters: “I hear you; the rest of the world hears you; and the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon." A second image [then came] into focus: Bush’s viewing of the Hurricane Katrina damage from the luxury of his Air Force One cabin high atop the immense suffering in the city of New Orleans below.

Growing perceptions that the Bush administration’s failures were mounting clearly caused the president and the GOP to lose key moderate voters.

In addition to advancing a more detailed explanation for the backlash against Republicans in 2006, this essay shows that rhetorical studies concerning public opinion can benefit immensely from analyzing vernacular discourse. Relying on public approval ratings to determine effectiveness of rhetoric is incomplete because polls do not report the underlying reasons behind the opinions of politically active citizens. Analysis of vernacular discourse, unlike reliance on poll numbers, uncovers what influential individuals think when they are allowed to speak their minds. More importantly, study of vernacular discourse allows the critic to comprehend how and why public opinion about any particular issue shifts over time. Although these texts cannot point to a single cause for some phenomenon, and are not perfectly representative of the electorate’s concerns, they provide a more detailed picture of the public’s thoughts than most conventional methods of engaging public opinion.

Finally, this essay is important because it functions as a case study that may be useful in explaining similar outcomes in future elections. If predictions about the 2010 midterm election are accurate, anti-government attitudes will threaten the Democratic Party’s majorities in the United States House of Representatives and the Senate. If 2010 indeed becomes another 1994 or 2006, critics should not be so quick to point to controversial issues like healthcare reform or the stimulus bill to explain the results. Barack Obama, much like George W. Bush, has been effectively described by his opponents, and an echoing media, as a partisan leader who threatens the long-term stability of the country. Conservative attempts to label him the “Teleprompter President” committed to a disastrous liberal – and even socialist – agenda appear to be catching on. As with Bush, Obama finds himself in a credibility crisis that could easily reach a tipping point with the electorate before the 2010 election. Keeping a close watch on the vernacular discourse of politically engaged citizens might tell communication scholars a lot if the
Democratic revolution of 2006 is replaced by a revolution of the Republican kind in the coming months.

**References**


Busto, V. J. (2003, May 12). Bush men can't relate to everyday living [Letter to the editor]. *USA Today*, p. 11A.


Jacobs, J. (2003, May 9). Moment will not be forgotten [Letter to the editor]. *USA Today*, p. 10A.


Little, N. B. (2003, May 7). Other photos tell real story [Letter to the editor]. *USA Today*, p. 10A.


-------------------

Author's Note

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Central States Communication Association’s 2010 conference in Cincinnati where it won the top student paper prize in the Rhetorical Theory and Criticism Interest Group. The author wishes to thank Dr. Robert Rowland for reading earlier drafts, and the anonymous reviewers for their contributions. Correspondence to: Ryan Shepard, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Kansas, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd, Rm 102, Lawrence, KS 66045. E-mail: rshepard@ku.edu
Twenty-Three Days: An Autoethnographic Account of the Washington, D.C. Sniper Shootings

Chelsea Jordan Gutshall
Undergraduate Student
gutshacj@dukes.jmu.edu
Department of Communication Studies
James Madison University
Harrisonburg, VA

ABSTRACT
Our lives are often defined by the struggles we confront because in facing these trials we must reflect upon experiences and the power others have in shaping our reactions. The Washington, D.C. sniper shootings of October 2002 are one case of such terror. My own experiences with two shootings in my hometown and living extremely close to others serves as the background for this autoethnography, detailing what I and my family faced during that single month. The focus, however, is not the snipers but family communication and how parents help children cope during unimaginable crises. This autoethnography is divided into three sections: a history of the sniper attacks, my narrative account, and a connection to pertinent literature along with my reflections seven years later.

Introduction

I was fourteen years old, a freshman in high school, when I discovered what it meant to be afraid. Barely a year earlier in New York City the twin towers had fallen and the Pentagon, not an hour away from my home, had been attacked. From those catastrophes I learned the meaning of grief, of hopelessness, and of terrorism. But it was not until 2002 when two men, John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, came to Spotsylvania, Virginia, that I looked fear in the face.

What follows is an autoethnographic account of the 2002 sniper attacks. I have chosen to relate this story in the style of an autoethnography for various reasons, the most prominent of which is the immediacy of the events (Crawford, 1996; Tillmann, 2009). Though years have passed I will likely never again see a white van without instinctively seeking a place to hide. To this day I think of the people who weaved and danced from place to place at gas stations when I stand there unprotected and seemingly unafraid. My mind overflows with such memories, memories of myself and my family, of schools desolate and silent. I am invested in these. While I acknowledge that seven years have passed since the shootings, my memories of those days will not weaken in my lifetime. This autoethnography opens with an overview of the sniper shootings and transitions into my narrative account of those twenty-three days. The snipers, however, are
not my central focus. Instead, I conclude this ethnography by connecting my memories to relevant communication research which examines the role of the media and parents in times of terror; emotional communication; and, most importantly, the power of family communication. Communication within my own family, whether discussing a recent shooting or emotions, was a salient and critical factor in helping me to not only understand but also recover from the attacks.

Chronology of Sniper Shootings

On October 2, 2002, a shooting in Maryland began a twenty-three day spree of terror (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2007a). James Martin was crossing a grocery store parking lot when he was shot and killed (FOX News, 2002). This shooting occurred in the evening hours of October 2; “by ten o’clock the next morning…four more people…had been similarly murdered” (FBI, 2007b). Twelve hours later, one more victim, a passerby on the streets of D.C., was also dead (FOX News).

Two days after the first six attacks, a forty-three year-old woman was shot in the back loading packages into her car at Michael’s Craft Store in Spotsylvania, Virginia (Pugh, 2002a). She became the first of three survivors. The following Monday, October 7, Iran Brown, a thirteen-year-old boy walking into his middle school, became the next victim (Pezzullo, Gould, & Pugh, 2002). With this shooting the snipers forged an identity for themselves as ruthless killers. Near the scene the first communiqué was discovered: a white tarot card on which the words “I am God” were scrawled (Epps & Pugh, 2002).

Wednesday, October 9, brought the next murder, this time at a gas station. Two days later, on the 11th, the snipers returned to Spotsylvania, again targeting a gas station (FOX News, 2002). The week closed with that shooting in Spotsylvania, the second in as many weeks. Roads were shut down and all white vans in the area through were thoroughly checked after witnesses claimed to have seen the vehicle in the vicinity (Pugh, 2002b).

Monday morning an FBI analyst was killed outside of a hardware store in Fairfax County, Virginia (Fox News, 2002). Following the attack, The Department of Defense approved airplane surveillance over Interstate 95 and the American Trucking Association ordered all truckers to be alert for a white van matching the description police had been circulating (Gould, 2002a). Later on October 17, one of the two snipers called the police to brag that he had also been responsible for a separate murder in Alabama (FBI, 2007a), which eventually linked the snipers to other unsolved murders. Within hours, the FBI had been provided with a fingerprint of the suspect and a name was not far behind (FBI).

Before police could apprehend the snipers, however, two more people were attacked. One man was shot in Ashland, Virginia (FOX News, 2002). He survived (FOX News) and a message, including a phone number, addressed to police was found at the scene (Epps & Pugh, 2002). The snipers were now threatening that “your children are not safe anywhere at anytime” (Miller, Woodruff, & Lumpkin, 2002).
The snipers would claim their final victim half a mile from where the shootings began on October 22, 2002 (Miller et al., 2002). A commuter bus driver was boarding his bus when he was shot and killed (Miller et al.). That same day the FBI discovered an identity (FBI, 2007a). Fingerprints from the arrest report in Mobile, Alabama were matched to Lee Boyd Malvo and John Allen Muhammad (FBI, 2007a). By that afternoon, FBI agents revealed that Muhammad owned a blue Chevy Caprice registered in New Jersey (FBI, 2007a).

After twenty-three days the killing spree was about to end. On October 24, a trucker at a rest area in Frederick County, Maryland saw the car police were searching for in the parking lot (Gould, 2002b). By the time police arrived, the trucker had blocked the exit and the snipers were asleep in their car (Gould, 2002b). Ten people were dead, three wounded (FOX News, 2002).

**The Snipers in my Life**

That October, the leaves would have been turning in welcome of fall and dropping from their branches. Only a few weeks more and I would have been able to see U.S. Route Three, the site of the first Spotsylvania shooting, through the bare trees of my neighborhood. After October 4, 2002, that road became an empty memorial and a sign that D.C. was closer than we had imagined.

My sister Ashley had a field hockey game that Friday afternoon. I had not gone, but my parents were there. Mom had heard about the shooting at Michael’s on the radio but was not worried about sitting outside exposed for a few hours. At that point, we were not afraid. Ashley’s teammates were explicitly told by the coaches not to discuss the attack but to instead focus on the game. In the moments following that first shooting the snipers had not yet thrown our lives into mass chaos. It would not be until later that night that my mother would begin to question whether the coaches put them in more danger by not moving everyone inside while an unknown assailant prowled the city.

That night was the first I heard of the attack. How many times had I stood in that exact spot? The woman was alive, but barely. As the news camera on television slowly panned the dark parking lot of the store, the road was for the first time in memory deserted. This road usually shut down because there were too many people; seeing no one terrified me more than seeing thousands.

My parents strove to assure Ashley and me that we were safe and that the probability of any of us being the next victim was too slim to even consider. The snipers likely would never come back to Spotsylvania, and we had to keep living. We did not even know the shooting had been the work of the snipers. Dad has since said that the greatest communication challenge he and my mother faced was convincing us that we could not stop because something terrible had happened a little too close. And though they could tell us we would be okay, they were not completely convinced. The woman at Michael’s certainly had not woken up that morning and thought she would be next in a haphazard shooting spree anymore than I did.
The weekend after the shooting my mother, sister, and I went to the mall in a defiant attempt to prove to the snipers that we would not be frightened. I did not want to go that day and my heart drummed in my chest. What did it matter if the snipers made us more cautious? It would not hurt to be more aware of our environment; the Michael’s shooting proved that. I was more than content to allow the world to spin without me until this madman was caught and everything fell back into place. I was scared, but I wouldn’t admit that and so went to the mall looking over my shoulder and feeling absent eyes staring at me.

In a poor show of conquering my irrational fear, I surveyed the parking lot as we drew nearer. Nothing was different. There were no puddles of blood on the ground, no police staking out the area with guns drawn. There was nothing: no traffic to see through, no mobs of people strolling through the parking lot. It was Saturday; the town should have been bustling. Perhaps it was, but not there. There was nothing there.

On any other Monday, the shooting would have been the gossip of the high school and listening to the dramatists expound upon how they had been in that parking lot only moments before the attack would have been normal. In a few days, we would have dropped the subject. It was on what should have been an ordinary Monday that a child was shot walking into his middle school in Maryland.

I was dropped off outside of my high school every morning and every morning walked laughing and talking inside. Middle schools started later than the high schools and when I began my first class of the day, Iran Brown was still getting ready. To be thirteen and known from Maryland to Virginia as the youngest and most remembered victim is a heavy burden for any child. As children ourselves, it was burden we all shouldered in different ways.

That shooting was the end of our childhood. We could no longer pretend to be carefree when a boy was rushed to the hospital in a wailing ambulance and into surgery while his parents paced the waiting room. Any conceptions I had had about enjoying those last moments before adulthood vanished. I lost the chance to be a child because that shooting shattered any idea that I was invincible.

My teacher turned on the television as news of the shooting filtered in. Doors were immediately locked and no one entered or left the building. Due to overcrowding, our school had trailers which made it necessary for students to be outside every forty-five minutes or so. Now every class was escorted by teachers to and from the trailers. I wondered at the time, as I do now, what one teacher could have done if the snipers had opened fire.

There was a sense of helplessness in my family after that. While my parents would throw themselves in front of a bullet for my sister and me, they could not protect us if they did not know where the threat was. The snipers went on to warn that children were not safe, and no one doubted that after this latest demonstration. We had no reason to believe that the snipers were making idle threats to keep us at their mercy. To be as helpless as both my mother and father were must have been devastating; I cannot imagine what they felt. We never again left the house without saying we loved one another at least once, often rushing back inside for one more hug. If
my parents had to release us into an unpredictable world, then there was nothing they could do but let us know they loved us before we stepped into the crosshairs of the shooters.

In the morning the mother who drove us to school watched from her van in the parking lot as we scampered inside, this time without laughter. It was only a show, however; she could do nothing to save us and we knew that. Iran Brown’s aunt too had sat in the parking lot watching him. We ran, checking over our shoulders as though hoping we would be able to see the snipers before they saw us. My school is not far from Interstate 95 and none of the other attacks had been either. Gossip flew through the school. At lunch someone swore that the shooter was using a silencer and though I am wholly ignorant of guns, when I heard that, I believed it automatically. A silencer that would keep me from hearing a shot automatically meant that I would be shot.

When I got off of the bus that afternoon, I was alone. It was not unusual; I was the only one at the bus stop most days. I live at the very back of my neighborhood, the end of the road with a backyard that is nothing but woods with direct access to busy thoroughfares. Two lots I passed on the way home, then, were just thick trees where anyone could hide. I did not run but I wanted to. The bus pulled away almost as soon as my foot touched the pavement, and suddenly alone, I began to walk. If I did not zigzag along to way to make myself a more difficult target, what did it matter? If the snipers were lurking in the woods then they would hit me no matter what I did. My eyes scanned the woods around me, hoping I would have enough time to duck before the bullet struck. I wondered if it would hurt. Those afternoons were the only times I thought I could be the next victim. I was alone and no one would be able to help me. Who would find me?

On Wednesday a second person was killed at a gas station. Panic broke out. My parents started going to fill up their cars at stations that were hopefully too far for a sniper to bother with. Others ducked and wove as they stood at the pump. This small burst of irrational behavior was our attempt to take back control of the situation. We would no longer be content with remaining passive targets, though that was all we were. My father was walking across a parking lot one afternoon during all of this when another man turned to him and asked if they “should be ducking and running?” (G. Gutshall, personal communication, October 1, 2009).

October 11th came, a Friday. I was in world history when the principal came over the loudspeaker and announced that we were to go to the back of our classrooms and sit down against the wall. Teachers were to immediately turn off the lights and lock the doors. We had never before been told to hide. Now, crouched in the back of a dark room, I shook. I cannot remember how long we stayed like that, but it was long after classes should have changed. It was not until much later that we learned that the police were at the school searching the grounds for the sniper. Massaponax High School is, like most places in Spotsylvania, surrounded by woods. That day, not two miles away, a man had been killed at an Exxon Station while pumping gas and police had no idea where the snipers had gone next. We would be the logical place to stage an attack, and were also the only school within easy reach of Interstate 95. And so, while police
scoured the campus, we sat in huddled masses realizing there had been a shooting but knowing nothing else.

After school we walked outside as teachers and police patrrolled the pavement. My sister was for once coming home with me and we sat together on the bus, silent but with linked hands. No one spoke because to get to our neighborhood we all knew that we would have to drive past the scene. If we had tried, we could not have prepared ourselves. The bus inched slowly down the road, every moment closing in on the roadblocks and stopped traffic. When we were a stop light away from the station we could see flashing lights, blockades, yellow tape. Ashley squeezed my hand tightly as I looked on in shock. There were cars still parked there as witnesses who had not witnessed anything. The fear came from never seeing anything. The man, the victim, was not even from Spotsylvania.

Miles around were crawling with police and the FBI. The entire gas station had been roped off as police paced the area. My body shut down as cold chills raced down my arms and I moved closer to Ashley, instinctively seeking the comfort she could provide just by being my sister. What I did not realize as I clung to her was that she needed someone to take care of her too.

The snipers never left the scene but there was no way to know that. We did not even know what they looked like. Police may have stopped them countless times and no one had been any wiser. Across the street was a Howard Johnson motel. By the time the investigation was launched, the snipers were sitting comfortably in their room overlooking the gas station, watching police chasing ghosts.

Dad was at the bus stop when we finally made it home. For once I would not be alone in the house with only my fear as company. Ashley and I climbed into the car, crying as we choked out the broken phrases in an attempt to describe the death, the fear, and the helplessness. And as he listened and comforted as best he could, his own anger grew, never having considered that the bus driver would be so careless as to take impressionable and already terrified children through the heart of an active crime scene, making them indirect witnesses to murder.

With every shooting, Interstate 95 was shut down because it was the only connection between the snipers and the victims. Perhaps whoever they were, they did not know the area any better and were unsure of other escape routes and would be on I-95 when it was closed. Maybe police would get lucky. Thousands of maybes that never came true. That afternoon, I-95 was closed in both directions from Richmond to D.C., and Dad’s fastest route to us was cut off. A normal thirty-minute drive became “a nerve wracking two hours plus” (G. Gutshall, personal communication, October 1, 2009) as he twisted his way through the back roads we could only pray the snipers did not know.

Eventually Mom made it home. She walked in the door, dropped everything into a heap in the middle of the floor, and enfolded my sister and me into her arms. Squeezing as though she would never let go or feared we would be ripped suddenly from her, she sobbed uncontrollably. Since the shootings began I had not seen her shed a tear, but that day, and only that day, she was
inconsolable. After she had heard that there had been a shooting near the school, she had been convinced that we had been hurt and there had been no way to get in touch with us.

When the tears at long last slowed, she gasped out what had happened that day. As she had been walking down the hall, her principal had carelessly mentioned there had been a shooting. Mom asked where; he replied Massaponax. The intersection where the gas station sits is called Massaponax but the man had not thought to clarify that it was not our high school. Mom had simply folded into herself, collapsing into a heap as the principal struggled to realize why. As soon as he remembered where we went to school, he dropped down beside her and told her that it was not at the school, just close to it, as though that made a difference. There was no reason to believe that my sister and I were not safe. But not knowing and not being able to talk to us did nothing to set her mind at ease. She knew where that gas station was and she knew where we were as well.

The principal had sent her to the school psychologist, who locked the door and tried in vain to calm my mother down. Mom has since said it was the longest half hour of her life and that “the hardest was not knowing” (C. Gutshall, personal communication, September 14, 2009). By now she had confirmed that the school had been locked down but where the snipers had fled to was a mystery. My father called to tell her he was leaving work to make it home before we did. As she herself drove home later, Mom passed white vans with orange stickers plastered on their trunks. It was the police’s way of marking vans that had already been searched.

Our grandparents started to beg us to leave Virginia and come to stay with them, either in West Virginia or Ohio. But Mom and Dad refused. We would not abandon our home or our lives because to do so would admit any possibility that we could be next. They had asked the same thing after September 11th, but we had said no then too. This was our home for better or for worse and to leave was to say that the snipers had won.

Ashley and I were supposed to go to a homecoming dance at another high school the week after the Massaponax shooting. Our dresses were ready and the school was nowhere near the interstate. After not letting us do many things, our parents were going to let us go to the dance to hopefully enjoy one night of blissful normalcy. There had been one shooting on Monday, but nothing since and so we saw it as a sign that we should go, rather than a warning to stay away.

The dance began at eight o’clock and we arrived a little before, hurrying in. From the school, we called to let our parents know that we were with our friends and safe inside. They told us to have fun, and Ashley and I separated with our respective groups. Eight o’clock came and went. What we did not know was that as we were dancing the first dance, a man had been shot in a restaurant parking lot forty-five minutes away.

It was a while before the administration had enough information to share and to make a decision. I do not know what time it was but the lights came on and the music stopped abruptly. I think we all knew what the principal was going to say before he did, but we pretended like we did not anyway. Over the intercom the principal told us that there had been another shooting. I was more surprised that it had happened on a weekend than that they had struck again. All of the
other shootings had been on weekdays. Vaguely, the principal continued that I-95 was closed in either direction. The dance was over and the administration would stay until everyone was gone.

I could see my sister from across the cafeteria and by the time we got to each other, she was dialing Mom’s cell phone as she hugged me. Ashley’s friend who had driven us was on her phone as well. For most of our teenage years we had striven to prove that we did not need our parents to take us around. Having licenses was proof of that. That night it did not matter how old or aloof we were. That night what we wanted most was our parents. Mom and Dad were on their way already by the time they got Ashley’s call; they had heard about the shooting and left immediately. Teachers kept us inside as we searched the dark parking lot for our parents’ cars. Mom and Dad could not get close enough to the school to pull up in front and so when they called to tell us that they were there, Ashley and I took each other’s hands and ran as quickly as we could in high heels to their car in the back of the lot. There was no point in asking if we had had fun because it was irrelevant. They were just “happy to have [us] in [their] circle again” (C. Gutshall, personal communication, September 14, 2009).

In my mom’s words, that shooting “brought our lives to a complete stop” (C. Gutshall, personal communication, September 14, 2009). After the Massaponax shooting, we had tried to find something positive to look forward to. But the snipers stole that from us. Now we were too scared to do anything. We stopped telling one another to keep moving because not moving forward was okay when every time we tried the snipers laughed. We were tired.

The Marine Corps Marathon, which my father worked, loomed closer and there were no plans to cancel the race. But the track wound thirty miles through the heart of Washington, D.C. and there was a sniper or two on the loose who was randomly shooting and had yet to miss. With fifty thousand people in the finish area, not to mention around the rest of the course, the marathon would be “like shooting fish in a barrel” (G. Gutshall, personal communication, October 1, 2009). My dad was going to be there, on the sidelines and distracted as he took care of details. He was going to be another target. Luckily, the snipers were caught three days before the race.

I was in health class. It was a Thursday. At some point our teacher turned on the television, though I cannot remember know why. At the time I thought there had been another attack. There, on every station, was the image of a rest stop in Maryland and an empty blue car. Not long before the snipers had been sleeping inside.

Nothing happened on the screen but we were riveted to it as though we expected at any moment someone would announce it was a joke. If that were the case, then I at least wanted to cling to this hope as long as possible. The blue car, now the focus of the case, looked nothing like the white van police had searched for. A newscaster began to fill us in slowly. The FBI had linked John Allen Muhammad to a fingerprint from a shooting in Alabama and discovered Muhammad had a car registered in his name. Within hours the FBI had known the license plate and truckers were advised to watch for the car but not approach it. This was no time to be a hero. By some miracle a trucker who had heard the newest developments stopped at a rest area that
night, October 24, 2002, saw the mythical blue car, and used his truck to block the exit. It was finally over.

Lee Boyd Malvo. John Allen Muhammad. Those were the names of the faceless demons who had haunted and destroyed countless lives. Malvo was seventeen, only a few years older than me. Muhammad would be accused by Malvo for having extensively brainwashed him but no one believed the claim and it was forgotten. Malvo was convicted for the majority of the shootings. Virginia, an active proponent of the death penalty, was the first to try the snipers. Because Malvo was a juvenile at the time, he was ineligible for the death penalty and so was sentenced, in Virginia at least, to life in prison. Muhammad was sentenced to death for his role and was executed outside of Richmond on November 10, 2009.

A few years after the events we would learn that the ultimate plan of the snipers had been to kill one person a day, focusing on children. They had wanted to gather orphans into a terrorist camp in Canada where they could train them to carry on the attacks. By the time that information was released, I was finishing my junior year of high school and viewed the event with the eyes of an adult. My parents never spoke about that part of the plan; they had barely survived one near school shooting. And besides, this was no longer about me; it was about them. It was about how they kept me safe when my world collapsed.

Families in Crisis

Having now told my story, I turn to that communication literature which best expresses how families survive during a crisis. I look first at how the media impacts emotional experiences and how parents can help children understand events and I then transition into the power of emotionally open communication. The final section will detail the influence and strength of family communication.

Media and Coping

Due to my age and maturity during the shootings, I frequently watched the nightly news with my parents. According to Schuster et al. (2001), such co-viewing can have both positive and negative effects. For instance, children who watch shows with detailed coverage of a trauma are not as removed from the horror and thus report higher stress and exaggeration of the threat (Schuster et al., 2001). They believe the attack poses more danger than it actually does (Schuster et al.). I agree. I walked home from my bus stop convinced I was a target when there was no reason why the snipers would have been lurking in my neighborhood. It was not their style. Nonetheless, I saw people killed in everyday places and so thought that every everyday place was a threat.

Another peril I faced from the news was becoming more aware of the danger (Wilson, Martin, & Marske, 2005). In turn, being reminded of the threats led to a more intense reaction (Cantor & Omdahl, 1991). Just as Schuster et al. (2001) found, the evening news increased my
apprehension and struggles to cling to normalcy. Instead of obtaining comfort in hearing how far away a shooting had been, I personalized the attack (Schuster et al.). As a family, we avoided specific places, such as gas stations close to the interstate when we could (Schuster et al.), going out of our way to try to feel safe. Cantor and Omdahl (1991) discovered results similar to Schuster et al. (2001). In their study of children’s fear reactions after watching a media clip of a particular danger, they discovered that children remember vivid scenes for a prolonged time (Cantor & Omdahl). It is not the information, but the fear they remember (Cantor & Omdahl).

In an investigation of how parents and children respond to kidnapping stories, Wilson et al. (2005) observed that when television is employed as a prominent role to disseminate information, parents increase protective actions. Children as young as kindergarten pay attention to the news (Wilson et al.), especially when a threatening event is center, causing parents to shield their children from portions of the news. My mother and father were able to find the balance Wilson et al. (2005) stressed between warning children appropriately and making them too afraid to face daily life. We did not hide. While certain activities were curtailed, we left the house. They kept us informed with the most important information but were also extremely careful to know how much information my sister and I could absorb (Lavoie, 2004) and how to ensure that we were also still allowed to be children.

**Parenting and Danger**

A predominant theme running through the research was the steps parents take to protect their children when they cannot constantly be with them. My own parents faced this struggle repeatedly, especially when the shootings adopted a more personal nature. Osofsky (1995) stated that “parents may become overprotective” (p. 786), limiting the activities their children take part in. My mother recalls not letting us do things we once enjoyed without restriction. It was her and my father’s small way of keeping us near and thus safe. Children themselves attempt to avoid areas they think are dangerous (Osofsky, 1995); after the Michael’s shooting I did not want to go to the mall because I no longer felt safe. I could not depend on my parents to wholly protect me and it became simpler to withdraw from normal activities (Osofsky, 1995).

In their study of how families can counteract the effects of danger, Garbarino, Kostelny and Dubrow (1991) found that while parents adjust their parenting styles to protect their children, they at the same time refuse to allow them to participate in activities that take them away from the family. Parents, however, cannot always refuse to let their children take part in routine activities. And when they can no longer know for sure that their children are safe, they may display signs of helplessness (Osofsky, 1995). They become overwhelmed with the need to protect their children from all imaginable threats (Lavoie, 2002); the crisis my parents faced was what to do when they could not act in accordance with that instinct. My entire life I relied on them to see me through the harder times; this was the first instance when they simply could not.

De Groof (2008) noted how parental fears can be adopted by children who are unsure how to react in the face of catastrophe. While I agree with this claim, I disagree with another
finding from the same study. De Groof (2008) claims that parental supervision increases a child’s fear while spending time outside of the family lowers the inhibition. If the world is falling to pieces, though, what child wants to be left alone? Had I been outside of my home more than I was, I cannot help but think that I would have been more afraid and constantly checking over my shoulder for a threat I would not know was coming.

My parents were not hesitant to discuss their emotions, which in turn helped me understand that it was all right to feel as though the world was beyond my control. When my mom returned from work after the Massaponax shooting and collapsed, or my father waited at the bus stop, they communicated both their growing helplessness and fear for our safety at the expense of their own. Though they never said as much, they displayed fear far above any I imagined possible. They had no concern for themselves as the shootings crept closer and closer. While I was scared for my family, I was also terrified for myself. I walked home thinking that the snipers had me in their sights. My parents never thought to worry about themselves.

**Family Communication and Support**

These emotionally open communications helped me learn how to cope with an uncontrollable situation (Gentzler, Contreras-Grau, Kerns, & Weimer, 2005). By focusing on the problem and how I felt (Gentzler et al., 2005), I was able to put into words everything within me and pass off the burden to another. My parents had more than enough to worry about, but they were willing to shoulder my fears as well. As a family we discussed the snipers often, which, while a catharsis, also increased the intensity of my emotions (Buijzen, Walma van der Molen, & Sondijet, 2007). From my parents I received the majority of information about the snipers (Buijzen et al., 2007) and after an attack, I wanted to be home because it was where I could make sense of what otherwise would have crushed me.

At the time of my sister’s field hockey game, no one knew the full extent of the sniper shootings but we still look back and wonder what would have happened had the snipers come near. Gaffney (2008) found that schools are not often prepared to adequately address trauma and provide long-term coping aid to children. This was clearly illustrated by my school system’s hesitation to disrupt our lives. They did not know how to take the steps necessary to ensure that we were safe. A bus driver should have been given explicit directions not to take students through a crime scene and a field hockey coach should have immediately cancelled the game. Neither did, and so the schools that were meant to protect us were at times putting us at even greater risk.

Cohen and Dotan (1976), in their study of families during the 1973 conflict in the Middle East, observed that during times of violence, family members increase contact with relatives. Hours away from my extended family, we relied heavily on the telephone not only as a means of keeping them updated but also to continually reassure them that we were safe. As I previously noted, my parents faced mounting pressure to leave Spotsylvania and stay with our grandparents. That was simply not possible. Our lives could not be packed up and abandoned. Consistent with
Zivotofsky and Koslowsky’s (2004) analysis of the effects of the D.C. sniper shootings, my parents did not consider leaving. And so we turned to the phone. Every time there was a shooting, we could expect a phone call around dinner. We could also use this time to tone down the information we passed on to lessen their fear.

Earlier I noted that when my mother, sister, and I went to the mall the weekend after the shooting, I did not tell them how I felt. By ignoring the threat, I hoped it would disappear and I would not have to think about it. At that point, none of us thought that the shooting was anything more than a random act. Because “the primary goal of healing is to assimilate the trauma...into...[one’s] life” (Gaffney, 2008, p. 47), I tried to force myself to heal by keeping what I felt inside, an ultimately poor decision. Coping mechanisms have the power to either “mitigate or exacerbate the impact of a stressor on personal functioning” (Altshuler & Ruble, 1989, p. 1337), which I learned the hard way. Not talking about what I was going through did not ease my fears because I gave up the opportunity for the support I desperately sought (Trees, 2005). I relied on avoidance (Altshuler & Ruble, 1989) and through the multiple setbacks I encountered doing so, eventually turned to open communication. I did not make the same mistake twice.

After the first instance of shutting down rather than opening up, I began to lean on my parents more than I had. My parents and I have always been close but the shootings lifted us to a new level. They united us as one selective group against the world. And while Hoffner and Haefner (1993) concluded that children rely on conversations with parents in place of physical comfort in hard times, I disagree. When the snipers struck two miles from my school, the greatest comfort I found was hugging my parents and sister. I was untouchable when with them. I feel that now, still.

Multiple studies have documented the effects of parental expressions of fear on children (Muris, Steerneman, Merckelbach, & Meesters, 1996; Wilson et al., 2005). My parents were supposed to be the strong ones, the fearless. Muris et al. (1996), for example, wrote that mothers are more likely to display fear around their children than fathers. This was true in my family. Dad was leaving for Washington, D.C. in the midst of the shootings and if I known how afraid he was it would have made it even more difficult to cope with my own emotions. This finding was further corroborated by Dunsmore, Her, Halberstadt, and Perez-Rivera (2009), who found that fathers mask their emotions in front of their children with greater frequency. The above authors concluded that doing so is meant to shield the child from heightened emotional intensity (Dunsmore et al., 2009). While Dad was always physically present, I never saw him cry. Even now he is better able to talk about the effect the attacks had on him than Mom.

Altshuler and Ruble (1989) noted that older children are more dependent on their parents than peers as a means of support. My parents were the only ones who could reassure me, and at least part of the time I believed them. Friends, on the other hand, knew no more than I did. Unlike the Burleson and Kunkel (2002) study which found that adolescents rely more on their peers for emotional support, I cannot remember ever talking to my friends about what I felt. My thoughts of helplessness were reserved for my parents when it was all right to be weak. I would
argue that in such painful circumstances, parents are most adept at helping a child to understand. As has been supported by communication literature detailing coping and friendships, I significantly decreased my social interactions with others (Zivotofsky & Koslowsky, 2004) and when I needed help I turned to my parents first (Zivotofsky & Koslowsky). My friends were as afraid as I was; there was nothing they could say that would alleviate my fears.

I have noted again and again how instrumental my family was during these times, how I doubt I would have coped as constructively were it not for them. My parents’ physical presence gave me a feeling of stability (Trees, 2000). When I came home after a shooting, I knew that they would be there and even if I was not completely comforted, I could lean on them. A few days after a shooting, talking about the effects with my family decreased the pain, as Gentzler et al. (2005) found in their own study of reflection after a horrific event. Through reflection I could understand the grief and cope with it in ways I was not immediately able to do. Continuing our dialogue about the Massaponax shooting weeks later allowed me to discuss why I did not feel safe at school or when I walked home and rather than keeping such doubts inside of me, I was able to confront them. I never had to pretend to be all right when I was not. Mom and Dad freely showed emotion and never thought it would harm me to see.

Lemieux and Tighe (2004) determined that not only does the context influence how likely a person is to seek support, but also that individuals are more likely to want explanations not emotion. I wanted to know why the sniper shootings were happening and when they would stop. Would tomorrow bring the end? Who were these invisible men? There was a fear in not knowing the future or what the next day would bring (Quarta, 2006) that no amount of comfort could completely destroy. Knowing that, I used factual information to console me when nothing else could.

Communication obviously played a critical role in helping me not only then but now in giving an outlet to the roiling emotions I experienced. As a family unit we reappraised the threat to make it less terrifying and monitored our reactions by looking at specific aspects (Hoffner, 1993) while discussing how those particular details related to us, in line with the majority of published research studies. The most important lesson I took from those days was that talking about my emotions had more power than I had ever believed. I now conclude with my final reflections and the limitations I faced writing this autoethnography.

**Conclusion**

This narrative transported me back to a time I would rather not revisit. There are days now that I walk alone down a busy street and flashback to that fourteen-year-old who once could not stand to be alone outside. At times I cannot help but wonder if something will happen again. In order to survive the times during and after I repressed a large part of what I experienced. An eerie and uneasy feeling still pervades when I catch a glimpse of an unmarked van and I fight to keep myself from searching out the nearest hiding place. White vans were not involved in the shootings when everything finally came to an end, and yet I cannot erase that image.
A particular limitation is how much time has passed since October 2002. I will not deny that at moments it was hard to recall the exact nature or time of an attack or what I felt as it unfolded around me. I relied on news reports as a means of jump-starting my memory to give a definite shape to the dim picture in my mind and spoke extensively to my parents about what had happened. That is not to say that the sniper shootings are not an incredibly salient memory or that I have forgotten those days because I never will. Only the details are a little blurrier than they once were. I would like to think that in spite of that difficulty I did justice to those weeks and those emotions. The sheer volume of what I discovered I had to say convinces me that what I wrote is the strongest memoir of October 2002 that I will ever be able to write.

My emotions acted as a different type of limitation. I constantly wondered whether I was clear enough when discussing how we felt and what it was like to live through the sniper shootings. I write and I feel the same, with the same pit in my stomach and cold chills racing down my arms as I bring forth an image of a gas station or mug shot. It was transferring those emotions to the page that was more challenging than I had originally thought. Friends in college have asked me to explain the sniper shootings to them, and one has told me that she heard of the attacks but they meant little to her. Had the snipers not to come to Spotsylvania, they would have meant little to me as well.

And so, I have obviously changed since the snipers, both because of what they did and because of the aftershocks. I had to grow up very quickly when it became clear that I could not pretend I was still safe in a world where I was not. I could not close my eyes and pretend it was not happening. The world is different now than it was before: I am less trusting of strangers and wonder whether another will someday repeat the attacks. I grew up in a world where a seventeen-year-old took it upon himself to play God and chose children as targets. As I have stressed often in this narrative, the attacks were random. It is no wonder that I question now whether they are still happening.

The final point I wish to make is that my father was right. Life does go on. I sometimes feel guilty that I do not always think about what happened in Spotsylvania all of those years ago, but my life did not and cannot stop because of it. When Dad would tell me that it would be all right eventually and that I could not stop living my life just because there was a madman on the loose, I did not believe him. Why shouldn’t I put my life on hold because I was afraid? I am indebted to him that I did not. It has been seven years and the scars on our town and within us remain. Those will not fade. But I believe I do more justice to the memory of the victims and to that little girl I once was when I walk outside and do not think I am wearing an imaginary target on my back. I have to continue, if only because I will not allow the snipers to taint my future as well.
References


Identifying Teaching Effectiveness: Using Student Skill Surveys, Speech Evaluations, and Quiz Scores to Inform Instruction

Sally Blomstrom
Associate Professor
blomstrs@erau.edu
Department of Humanities and Communications
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University
Prescott, AZ

ABSTRACT
This paper suggests an instrument for measuring students’ self perceptions of improvement in public speaking skills, i.e., a skill survey, and a method to inform and improve instruction by looking at results from that survey in combination with instructor evaluation forms for persuasive speeches, quiz scores, and an information literacy measure. Data were collected from students enrolled in a public speaking course at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Background on the survey development and the method is provided along with results and discussion.

Institutional assessment and program reviews represent situations in which faculty may be asked to undertake a systematic review of student learning outcomes in the basic communication course to demonstrate how well those outcomes were met. In addition to meeting an accountability function in those situations, assessment can serve the function of continuous improvement (Ewell, 2008). This paper suggests an instrument for measuring students’ self perceptions of improvement in public speaking skills, i.e., a skill survey, and a method to inform and improve instruction by looking at survey results in combination with instructor evaluation forms for persuasive speeches, quiz scores, and an information literacy measure. The tools and method suggested here were collected as part of our institution’s accreditation process. The primary purpose of this paper, however, is to describe these tools and their use in a framework for improving instruction in a public speaking course. To accomplish this end, the rationale for development of the student skill survey, its use alone and in combination with other measures will be presented. It is helpful to begin with background on the course and institutional information.

The data were gathered from a semester-long basic communication course. This lower division course had a public speaking orientation and was taught in a face-to-face format. The course included some hybrid elements of group communication and interpersonal skills (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). The course was taught at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) in Prescott, AZ. ERAU has two residential campuses and over 140 smaller
campuses worldwide. Prescott’s campus has a population of approximately 1700 students with majors divided between three colleges: Engineering (38%), Aviation (36%), and Arts and Sciences (25%). This basic public speaking course was required for all majors to meet a general education requirement. The average class size was 20 students when the data were gathered. Most of the sections (over 75% each semester) were taught by full-time faculty. The other sections were taught by adjunct faculty, who had taught the course for several years. All sections used a common syllabus and textbook; however, each instructor determined the assignments for the section. Faculty teaching sections during the 2008-2009 academic year asked students to complete a student skill survey.

Service-Learning

This investigation began with a motivation to identify the effectiveness of service-learning. Service-learning was introduced by one instructor in several sections of this basic public speaking course. Service-learning was a good fit, because communication is a practical discipline that can contribute to society through service (Applegate & Morreale, 1999). Service-learning provides service opportunities for students to apply course content in practical situations, and the method has increased in popularity in the field of communication. Oster-Aaland, Sellnow, Nelson, and Pearson (2004) reported that 63% of the reporting institutions participating in a 2001 survey placed up to quarter of their students in service-learning projects. An additional 26% placed between 26 and 50% of their students. The additional 11% placed more than half of their students in service-learning projects. Students realize many benefits from service-learning: helping them understand course material better, enjoying learning, liking service, receiving a professional development benefit, and gaining skills, experience, and confidence in their abilities and skills (Isaacson & Saperstein, 2005.). Evidence suggests service-learning is prevalent in communication, yet no standard methods of assessing the effectiveness of service-learning pedagogy appeared in the literature at the time when service-learning was introduced into this basic public speaking course.

Student Skill Survey

To address the need for an assessment measure and the gap in the literature, an instrument was developed using a theoretical framework and method to assess learning in communication (Blomstrom & Tam, 2008, 2009, 2010). The approach employed a survey based on discipline-defined criteria directly related to the course’s stated outcomes, which provided evidence of change in the level of skills and knowledge expected for students who have completed one college speech course. Items were primarily drawn from a list of speaking and listening competencies expected for college having completed one college speech course available on the National Communication Association website (Morreale, Rubin, & Jones, 1998). Additional items for personal skills and team skills were gleaned from the Commission
on Public Relations Education report, The Professional Bond (Turk, 2006). Selected items were divided into five factors: content, organization, delivery skills, personal skills, and team skills. The student learning outcomes for the speech course with the related factors from the survey are listed below:

1. Demonstrate increased abilities in speech, personal communication, and career communication. (Content, organization, delivery, personal skills and team skills)
2. Demonstrate the presentation of speeches to inform and to persuade. (Content, delivery, and organization)
3. Lead or participate in group discussions reaching problem-solving or fact-finding goals, and respond to comments and questions from the audience while maintaining objectivity. (Personal skills and team skills)
4. Maintain group cohesiveness by using task and maintenance behaviors. (Personal skills and team skills)
5. Use informative, persuasive, and empathetic listening strategies and write journal entries or reports that describe the results. (Personal skills)

The first data set for this paper included student responses to this survey (Appendix A). Students rated their skills on 57 items using a 5-point scale with 1 representing poor and 5 representing excellent. The items distinguished between content (11), organization (7), delivery (7), team skills (17) and personal skills (15). Students in the basic course completed the survey during the spring of 2008, the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years. The survey was administered at the beginning (time 1) and end of the course (time 2). The changes reported by the students from the time 1 to time 2 provided evidence from the students’ perspective that they made gains in those areas. The results were used to assess how well students achieved the five stated learning outcomes in all sections of the course. Additionally comparisons were made between the skill levels reported by students enrolled in service-learning sections with student skills enrolled in other sections. The team assignment was unique for service-learning sections.

An analysis was performed on data gathered from students at the beginning and at the end of the semester in seven sections (N=112) of the speech course taught at our institution during the fall 2008 semester. Three of the seven sections incorporated service-learning. This time frame, one semester of five in which the survey was conducted, was selected because it was one of the semesters when data were gathered from all sections of the course, and the results were typical. For the seven sections of speech classes taken as a whole, gains were seen in the means of all five factors between the beginning of the semester (pre-test) and the end of the semester (post-test) (see Table 1). The group difference examined under repeated-measure MANOVA was also significant (Wilks’ lambda = .35, p <.001). The combination of sample size and effect size was credible (power = 1). The 5-factor construct was also sufficiently robust (partial eta square = 0.65). To further examine which of the 5 factors were responsible for the overall difference observed, a univariate contrast was performed. All five factors were significant (p < .001) after making Bonferronic adjustments (Table 2). The factors were related to the
student learning outcomes for the course and offered one piece of evidence that the outcomes were being met.

**Table 1**

*Self-Assessed Competencies at Beginning and End of Communications Course*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Pre-test M (SD)</th>
<th>Post-test M (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>3.52 (0.48)</td>
<td>4.14 (0.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>3.36 (0.60)</td>
<td>3.97 (0.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>3.20 (0.73)</td>
<td>3.92 (0.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Skills</td>
<td>3.70 (0.45)</td>
<td>4.14 (0.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td>3.95 (0.47)</td>
<td>4.30 (0.44)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When comparing service learning with other pedagogies, some trends surfaced, but none were significant at <.05. Students in the service-learning sections showed larger gains, particularly in the area of team skills. This finding was consistent with the recent American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) report, which indicated that service-learning students scored significantly higher on 5 out of 6 institutional student learning outcomes (Prentice & Robinson, 2010). The outcomes measured in the AACC study were critical thinking; communication; career and teamwork; civic responsibility; global understanding and citizenship; and academic development and educational success. Global understanding and citizenship was the only outcome mentioned in the AACC report in which students in service-learning did not score significantly higher.

**Self Report Measures**

The student skill survey measures learning from the student’s perspective. Self report measures have met with mixed results in the literature, and an understanding of that research is warranted before student skill survey results are compared with instructor evaluations. Allen’s (1989) meta-analysis of communication apprehension reduction found that the correlations from self report measures differed significantly from correlations of observer ratings. The self report measures were consistent in the direction and magnitude of anxiety reduction due to therapy, and the same was true for observer ratings and physiological measurement devices. Dwyer and Fus (2002) looked at communication apprehension, self-efficacy, and self-perceived public speaking competence, and while significant changes occurred in levels on all three measures during the semester, only self-efficacy predicted the grade.
Table 2

Univariate Effects for Self-Assessed Competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>$F(1,111)$</th>
<th>Partial Eta Squared</th>
<th>Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>172.33</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>135.44</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>105.70</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Skills</td>
<td>83.57</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Skills</td>
<td>84.77</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All F-tests were significant at $p < .001$.

This finding raised the questions about the relationship between self report measures and grades. The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS, 1994) issued a report on the feasibility of using various measures as proxy evidence for student development. A section was devoted to “The Special Case of Student Self-Reports,” which concluded that results obtained from self-reported data on cognitive attainment would be consistent with more direct measures. Batty (2007) compared students’ self reports with pre- and post-college standardized test scores, and course grades. Some limitations in the study resulted in indefinite findings for the aspects most closely related to this paper; however, the author concluded that self-reported learning should be interpreted with caution. In a more recent study by Weiss, Koller, Hess, and Wasser (2005) a statistically significant correlation was found between medical students’ self-assessment and the final clerkship grade for written/verbal skills. The literature appears to suggest that self report measures and more direct measures (including grades) tend to move in the same direction, but the magnitude may differ.

Instructor Speech Evaluations

The literature suggested that self report measures would be consistent with more direct measures, which would include instructor evaluations of persuasive speeches. Inconsistencies in the literature may be due to a lack of shared understanding of the terms. This gap could be addressed by incorporating a method to align students’ self reported skill ratings with the direct measure being used, in this case instructor evaluations. Establishing a shared understanding of the terms and setting reasonable expectations for achieving those skills would help align the two perspectives. When the skill survey was administered at the start of the course, students were informed that the content was based on expectations for students who had completed one college course in public speaking. They were further instructed that these were the expectations for them at the end of the course. Throughout the course these skills were reinforced, particularly during
speech assignments. For example, the reflection for the informative speech which preceded the persuasive speech, involved the students watching a video of their speeches and answering several specific questions. Students evaluated their speech on several of the same items the instructor used. This method reinforced the goals and standards for the course.

Instructor evaluations for the persuasive speech were chosen as a comparison measure with skill survey results, because the instrument provided the instructor’s perspective on the same items measured by the student skill survey. The persuasive speech occurred in the second half of the semester following other speeches, and the evaluation of the persuasive speech provided a measure of public speaking skills. The final grade for the course included papers and quizzes in addition to speech grades. Some students failed to complete all of the assignments, which adversely affected their course grade but may not have affected their speaking skills.

Richlin’s (2006) design blueprint provided an organizational format for matching the teaching goal with the learning outcome, the learning experience, and an evaluation plan for each experience (see Appendix B). The Design Blueprint includes a segment from the larger table, which included several more learning experiences for each objective, along with additional information such as the source for each learning experience and how the activity would be evaluated. For purposes of this paper, only the student learning outcome and the learning experience were included in the table for illustration purposes. A design blueprint created for each semester provided a way to keep track of changes in the learning experiences over time. Changes in learning experiences may produce changes in instructor evaluations of speeches or in student skill survey responses or both.

The comparison made between the results of the skill survey at time2 and the instructor evaluations for the persuasive speech (Appendix C) were used as a way to view skills from two perspectives. The persuasive evaluation form was a composite of evaluation forms taken from instructor manuals accompanying some of the commonly used textbooks for speech and modified for our use. The instructor manuals accompanied books by Stephen Lucas, Rudolph Verderber, Kathleen Verderber, Deanna Sellnow, and Joseph DeVito. All persuasive speeches were graded using a 5-point scale on items related to content, organization, and delivery. Each student’s scores were recorded in Excel.

The time period used for the analysis of the instructor evaluations differed from the time period used for the student survey. The student skill survey results were based on responses from students enrolled during one semester. The analysis of the instructor evaluation forms involved changes attributable to different teaching techniques, which required multiple semesters. The time period for this analysis covered 1½ years from fall 2008 through fall 2009 and included ten sections. The ten sections were taught by one faculty member and incorporated service-learning. Each of the sections followed the same basic course structure with some variation in the order of assignments. Items from the evaluation forms were selected based on how closely the items matched items on the students’ self-report surveys completed at the end of the terms. A comparison was made between the means of selected items from the instructor evaluations and the means of the corresponding responses to the student skill survey (Table 3). The overall mean
difference between the mean of students’ self report level and the mean of the instructor’s evaluation was less than 0.10, which indicated reasonable correspondence. Students’ self evaluations were not consistently higher, which some literature suggested. The discrepancies provide insights into which areas need better shared understanding.

Table 3

**Instructor Persuasive Speech Evaluation and Students Post-test Reported as Means**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor Persuasive Evaluation Mean</th>
<th>Std Dev</th>
<th>Students’ Post-Test Mean</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fall 08</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>4.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spring 09</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>4.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fall 09</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>4.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The categories (content, organization, delivery, personal skills, and team skills) were composed of individual items. For this analysis similar items were chosen from the student survey and from the evaluation form. A closer examination of aggregate responses to individual items on the evaluation form revealed that students scored better on gaining attention and interest than on establishing personal credibility. To shed light on the results the design blueprint for the class was employed. Previously students worked in teams to write introductions and conclusions for a given set of topics, which addressed the first student learning outcome for the course. While the exercise seemed to help students think of ways to gain attention and relate the topic to the audience, the students did not display evidence of understanding how to build credibility.
During the Fall 2009 term students were asked to go around the room and state why they were credible on their persuasive speech topics. In Appendix B that learning experience was referred to as Identifying Personal Credibility. Results in Table 4 indicated that personal credibility statements increased relative to a year earlier, possibly due to that change in learning experience. It appears as though personal credibility statements gained at the expense of statements relating the topic to the audience suggesting that an additional learning experience may be useful.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fall 08</th>
<th>Spring 09</th>
<th>Fall 09</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gained attention and interest</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related topic to audience</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established personal credibility</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quiz Scores

The third data set included quiz scores. As mentioned, the final grade included quiz scores and papers in addition to grades for speeches. Students took an online quiz for each chapter in the text. The quizzes were taken from The Challenge of Effective Speaking 14th Edition, written by Rudolph Verderber, Kathleen Verderber, and Deanna Sellnow. The course grade included 15 of the 16 chapter quizzes. The students could opt to take 15 quizzes or the lowest score of the 16 would be excluded in the calculation of the final grade. The quizzes consisted of multiple choice and true/false questions from a pool. Students could use their text and notes for the quizzes.

The quiz scores from the same ten sections of the course were used in this analysis. The analysis looked at which chapters had the highest quiz scores and, more to the point, which chapters had the lowest quiz scores. The average quiz scores were compared across sections for Fall 08, Spring 09, and Fall 09. Chapters 2 and 9 were tied in terms of the frequency each occurred with the highest average score per class. The highest quiz scores varied between chapters for different classes. The lowest average scores, however, did not vary beyond two chapters. The chapter which appeared the most often with the lowest score was Chapter 14. Scores for the Chapter 11 quiz were also low, but occurred less often than Chapter 14.
Information Literacy Skills

The final data set referred to in this paper was taken from the results of the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS) for our campus. SAILS, a 45-item knowledge test spanning eight skill sets based on documents from the Association of College and Research Libraries, was administered during the fall of 2009 (Project SAILS, 2010). This work was funded through an assessment grant awarded to a reference librarian with the Christine and Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Library and Learning Center on ERAU’s Prescott campus. Literacy skills were being assessed. The results compared our institution with other institutions of the same type and with all other institutions who participated in the study. Items from the SAILS instrument were compared with related items from the student skill survey. Students in the basic course participated in a library instruction session during class time and their responses were collected as part of the SAILS data set.

The student skill survey (Appendix A) indicated an increase in students’ self reported level of literacy skills. The SAILS report provided richer data and offered more depth to our understanding of the students’ skills. Students at our institution were above the benchmark for similar institutions in terms of selecting finding tools (564 compared with 545 for similar institutions) and searching (548 compared with 535), and about the same as the benchmark for evaluating sources (578 compared with 571). These data suggest that students would benefit from additional time devoted to evaluating sources (See Table 5). An additional source of data supporting this conclusion was an assessment conducted by the library staff in which bibliographies were collected from students in several classes and frequencies were calculated of the types of sources cited by students.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 08</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 09</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 09</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Background Information on Service-Learning Projects

Comparisons were made between service-learning and non-service-learning sections for the student skill survey. The other measures discussed in this paper were all collected from service-learning sections of the basic course. Some background information on the service-learning projects is warranted. The service-learning projects involved the development and
delivery of presentations on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) topics by the university students to elementary students. Students presented to participants in a family science program, in the local after-school program, or in the Math & Science Olympics held on campus. In all cases the university students presented to a multi-age audience. The university students led the participants in hands-on projects and demonstrations to reinforce the concepts they were covering in the presentations.

**Process**

In order to investigate the effectiveness of the pedagogy the process shown in Figure 1 was followed. The core set of knowledge and skills for content, organization, delivery, personal skills, and team skills comprised the student skill survey. The appropriate measures of learning included differences in survey results from time1 to time2, instructor evaluation forms of students’ persuasive speeches, quiz scores, and findings from Project SAILS. With the measures identified, a design blueprint table was created to match student learning outcomes with the teaching techniques and activities. Data was collected and analyzed. Through reflection a plan for instructional improvement was developed. The plan typically involved identification of new

**Figure 1**

*Process Map*
or revised teaching techniques or activities. These changes were recorded in the new design blueprint outlining the plan for the class. The plan was implemented, data gathered and analyzed, changes were made based on the analysis, and the process continues.

Discussion

Instructor evaluations for persuasive speeches were compared with skill survey responses at the end of the course. Results suggested that the perceptions of the instructor and the students were fairly consistent. Differences between students’ perceptions of their skills and instructor evaluation of those skills indicated where improvements were needed and created an opportunity to address the discrepancy by modifying or changing a learning experience. When the discrepancy is identified the modification can be recorded in the design blueprint and subsequent comparisons of the data can be made in the future to determine the extent of improvement. One way to increase the mutual understanding of expectation may involve a better designed learning experience for the observation, analysis, and evaluation of sample speeches.

Scores indicated that items needed to be changed for the Chapter 14 quiz. This chapter was covered near the end of the term, and students may have been less likely to complete the quiz due to competing demands. To see if that was the case a comparison was made with scores for Chapter 15, which was covered later in the semester. The scores for Chapter 15 were higher, so it appeared the issue with Chapter 14 was specific to the items, which needed to be revised.

The SAILS instrument consisted of three particular areas of interest, each measured by multiple items. Results from SAILS suggested more time be spent on evaluating sources. The first task suggested by this finding was to address whether a shared understanding existed with students about how to evaluate sources.

A limitation of this analysis was that although student skill surveys were completed in each section of the course, differences may have occurred in how the survey was administered. Differences in instructions could result in students interpreting some items differently.

Suggestions

The student skill survey can be used in a variety of ways, especially when used as a pre- and post-test comparison. Here it was used as one piece of evidence to investigate whether students in all sections of the course met the student learning outcomes. The results of that investigation identified specific areas in which students in service-learning sections made larger or smaller gains relative to students in other sections. The survey can also be used in conjunction with other instruments, such as instructor evaluations, to obtain multiple perspectives on students’ skills. Multiple perspectives for similar items can be particularly useful for an instructor teaching multiple sections, who wants to compare a teaching technique or particular assignment.
Peers and/or community partners can evaluate student presentations using similar items to provide additional perspectives of student skills. Faculty may find it useful to discuss the items in advance of using the measurement to arrive at a shared understanding of each numeric value’s corresponding meaning. For example, when evaluating team presentations our community partner had a different interpretation of what was meant by a group coming across as a team. After talking about the item, a shared interpretation was reached so that students would have consistent feedback. Students commented they found feedback from the community partner to be very useful in preparing their presentations. Another way to use persuasive speech evaluation forms (e.g., Appendix C) is to look at the average results for each item in the class. The results can indicate some aspect of speech instruction that needs to be strengthened. That can be accomplished through use of different assignments or teaching techniques.

Using data in the ways suggested in this paper serves to inform instruction. The method put forth in this paper used a student survey, which can be modified for students in junior high, high school, or college. The survey results provided quantitative data that could be compared with other quantitative information. The analysis presented here indicated a correspondence between students and the faculty member on their skill levels in terms of content, organization, and delivery, which are critical components of public speaking. Within those categories, concepts (building credibility) and chapters (Chapter 14) were identified that required additional work. The analysis and reflection provided feedback and guidance for enhancing instruction in an informed way.

References


# Appendix A - Skill Survey

**Skill Survey**  
Class__________          Name________________________________  
Major______________________          Date ____________________  

Please respond to these questions by placing an X in the column to the right describing your abilities in each area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I rate my abilities in this area as:</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Below Ave.</th>
<th>Ave.</th>
<th>Above Ave.</th>
<th>Exc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Content**

Identify a subject that is relevant to your role as a speaker, your knowledge, concerns, and interests.

Adapt and narrow topic to the context in terms of audience and setting.

Locate, evaluate, and use information resources.

Based on your research, select appropriate support materials based on the topic, audience, setting, and purpose.

Cite sources appropriately.

Select language appropriate to the topic, audience, purpose, context, and speaker.

Choose words to clearly express ideas, to create and maintain interest, and to enhance your credibility.

Select words that avoid sexism, racism, and other forms of prejudice.

Communicate ethically.

Use creativity in writing the speech.

Identify and create visuals and other presentation aids that support the purpose of the speech.

**Organization**

Organize ideas and contents in patterns that are appropriate to the topic, audience, context, and purpose.

Adapt speech to audience.

Write and deliver an effective introduction.

Write clear and distinct main points.

Summarize the central message in an effective manner.

Write effective transitions to establish connections.

Write and deliver an effective conclusion.

**Delivery**

Demonstrate nonverbal behavior (including emphasis, gestures, posture) that supports the verbal message.

Use vocal variety to heighten and maintain interest.

Articulate clearly.

Maintain eye contact with audience during at least 90% of your speech.

Speak confidently.

Speak dynamically.

Use creativity in the delivery of the speech.
| I rate my abilities in this area as: |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

**Team Skills**

- Appreciate diverse perspectives of team members.
- Recognize that individual differences can improve the team’s outcome.
- Demonstrate professional behavior in team meetings.
- Set and manage realistic agendas.
- Adapt behavior to the task being done.
- Motivate others to participate and work effectively as a team.
- Manage time and resources effectively in accomplishing the team task.
- Communicate team activities (e.g., sharing meeting times and places, sharing contact information, sharing files) with the team effectively.
- Complete tasks assigned in the team in a timely fashion.
- Identify important issues or problems in a team.
- Speak up and share your ideas in a team.
- Identify and manage misunderstandings.
- Manage and resolve team conflicts effectively.
- Negotiate with team members effectively.
- Build consensus in a team.
- Incorporate comments from critiques into the final presentation.
- Demonstrate appropriate interpersonal skills for various contexts.

**Personal Skills**

- Respect others.
- Be responsible.
- Be intellectually curious.
- Be a self-starter.
- Strive for excellence.
- Demonstrate positive attitude consistently.
- When speaking or listening, demonstrate awareness that each person has a unique perspective.
- Demonstrate awareness that each person's knowledge, experience, and emotions affect listening.
- Recognize main ideas delivered in a presentation.
- Recall basic ideas from listening to presentations.
- Listen to comprehend.
- Accept criticism in a professional manner.
- Always be on time.
- Communicate if you cannot meet an obligation.
- Demonstrate empathy.
Appendix B

Design Blueprint of Student Learning Outcomes and Learning Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Learning Outcome</th>
<th>Learning Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate increased abilities in public speaking, personal communication, and career communication.</td>
<td>Identifying Personal Credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>One-point speech with 3 pieces of supportive material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflection assignment on informative speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate the presentation of speeches to inform and to persuade (to convince, to activate).</td>
<td>Informative speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persuasive speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service-learning team speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead or participate in group discussions reaching problem-solving or fact-finding goals, and respond to comments and questions from the audience while maintaining objectivity.</td>
<td>Persuasive speech Q&amp;A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solve the mystery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 Angry Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain group cohesiveness by using task and maintenance behaviors</td>
<td>Service-learning project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rehearsals for service-learning presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Processing feedback from community partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use informative, persuasive, and empathetic listening strategies and write journal entries or reports that describe the results.</td>
<td>Listening triads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effective Listening Checklist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Capstone Presentation Analyses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Persuasive Speech Evaluation Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The rating scale is:  
5=excellent    4=good    3=average    2=fair    1=poor

**STRUCTURE (Macro)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gained attention and interest</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related topic to audience</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established credibility</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stated claim</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preview main points</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main points clear</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main points related to claim</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective transitions</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main points summarized</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivid ending</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**AUDIENCE ADAPTATION PLAN**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Each item addressed adequately</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear objectives</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation of plan</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STRUCTURE (Micro)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear, vivid language</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style was novel</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No slang or jargon</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No vocalized pauses (um, uh, ah)</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DELIVERY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eye contact 90% of the time</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic presentation</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicated enthusiasm for topic</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expressions</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presented visual aids well</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonverbal behaviors support message</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONTENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data fully supported main points</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear, relevant data</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credible, recent sources</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective sources</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrant clear</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources cited during speech</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources referenced at end of speech</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content built toward speech goal</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressed different learning styles</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual aids supported message</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**OVERALL EVALUATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Met assignment</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech completed within time limit</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held interest of audience</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments:
Using Seinfeld to Enhance Storytelling Speeches

Kelly Soczka Kaiser
Communication Studies Instructor
kkaiser@winona.edu
Communication Studies Department
Winona State University
Winona, MN

ABSTRACT
This classroom activity uses video clips from the sitcom, Seinfeld, in order to provide students with examples of the characteristics of exceptional storytellers and their ability to convey meaning. By applying the Freytag’s Pyramid to storytelling, students have found a tool to assist them in constructing a captivating narrative. These visual skits offer students an opportunity to view how a story is effectively organized, what elements comprise an extraordinary narrative, and how to dramatically display emotion.

Goals/Objectives
1. Students will be able to recognize essential elements of storytelling.
2. Students will be able to identify effective delivery techniques associated with public speaking and storytelling. These include natural hand gestures, genuine eye contact, and the use of vocal variety.
3. Students will be able to identify the importance of the use of descriptive adjectives and figurative language.
4. Students will be able to recognize the components of Freytag’s Pyramid.
5. Students will observe how to convey emotion through the use of facial expressions, hand gestures, and vocal variety.

Courses
Public Speaking, Literature, Theatre and Film Studies Courses.

Resources Needed
Internet connection or Seinfeld DVDs, DVD player and LCD projector.

Rationale
As an instructor of introductory speech courses, I became disenchanted with the typical introductory speech where students were asked to give a short speech introducing themselves or their partners. This assignment did not seem to convey real insight into the identities of the students. Consequently, I assigned my students the task of giving a storytelling speech about a
significant event that has happened to them in the past that highlights who they are as a person. This storytelling speech allows other course members to get to know their fellow classmates’ personalities, identities, cultural backgrounds, and past experiences in a less explicit manner.

The next hurdle that presented itself was organization. Students would typically give away the climax of the story too early, causing the audience to lose interest in the speech. To help solve this problem, I had students use Freytag’s Pyramid to organize their narratives. In 1863, German Scholar, Gustav Freytag constructed a pyramid shaped illustration to describe the plot sequence of narratives and dramas (Thursby, 2006). Thursby’s (2006) description of Freytag’s pyramid is comprised of seven steps or elements that create a narrative or drama. These include the exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, and the denouement.

- An excellent illustration and description of Freytag’s Pyramid can be found at Professor George Hartley’s website at http://oak.cats.ohiou.edu/~hartleyg/250/freytag.html

Using Freytag’s Pyramid to visually illustrate plot construction has increased the organizational success rate of students, as well as, lowered the anxiety of students. Most students have been exposed to this model of story construction in elementary or middle school English courses and usually recall the elements of Freytag’s Pyramid quite quickly. Students felt more prepared for their speeches by having a model, formula, and process to follow for telling their stories.

By applying Freytag’s Pyramid to the Seinfeld episodes, the educator can incorporate a multiple sensory experience into the classroom, which can aid students in memory retention (Jensen, 1996). Students will remember information more readily when exposed to stimulation that engages several brain functions (Hill, 2001). Hill (2001) states that, “For best recall, multiple sensory experiences should be employed to encode memory with vision, hearing, sound, smell, or movement and relationships” (p. 73). Watching the Seinfeld clips clearly engages both visual and auditory stimulation.

Secondly, the human brain has an easier time retaining information when associating the memory in the context in which it would be used (Hill, 2001). Thus, by watching the professional storytellers perform these concepts in context, students will be able to retain and comprehend these new ideas more readily. Students can observe how natural hand gestures look and can hear how vocal variety actually sounds when used to enhance the performer’s story.

Finally, Engleberg and Daly (2005) also contend that audiences remember stories because they create lasting images. If stories create lasting images and the elements of Freytag’s Pyramid was applied to the Seinfeld clips, the objectives of the lesson will be easier for students to recall. For example, students will remember what the resolution of the story is because they can associate the resolution with the lasting image of George saving the whale by removing the golf ball from the whale’s blowhole in the Marine Biologist video clip.
Activity Directions

1. The first 15 – 20 minutes of class are spent discussing what stories are, why people use narratives, and what characteristics or components make a good story. This should also include a description and discussion of Freytag’s Pyramid.

2. The next step is to play the video clip in its entirety to allow students to take in the whole story. Then, replay the video, stopping the video to point out the examples of the following concepts:

   - **Effective Delivery** – Hand gestures, vocal variety, facial expressions, and eye contact.
   - **Freytag’s Pyramid** – Exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, and denouement.
   - **Figurative Language** – Similes, metaphors, and descriptive adjectives.
   - **Retelling of the Story** – The best stories are often retold. Each video clip provides an example of the story being retold to others.

3. I would suggest beginning with the Pinky Toe Sketch and then repeating this procedure again with the Marine Biologist Sketch. I show both video clips in class because I believe the actors who play George and Kramer use different methods for being engaging storytellers. In the Pinky Toe sketch, I point out how Kramer uses a broad range of body movements, hand gestures, and facial expressions to tell his story. Whereas, in the Marine Biologist Sketch, I emphasize the fact that George uses more figurative language and vocal variety to be an effective storyteller. While viewing the pinky toe sketch, I pause the video to point out the plot elements of Freytag’s Pyramid. Then, after showing the second sketch, I ask students which elements of the story mirror Freytag’s Pyramid to garner some discussion.

   The Pinky Toe Sketch should begin when the camera pans in on Kraemer’s face and you hear Toby scream. The sketch should end when Elaine’s co-workers are recounting the story to her about Toby losing her pinky toe. The Marine Biologist Sketch should begin when George rolls up his pants and walks into the ocean. Play the video clip until the very end of the episode for this sketch to reveal the denouement.

   - The Pinky Toe Sketch can be found on You Tube at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkpvON6IpNs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkpvON6IpNs) (Note: The You Tube version does not include the concept of retelling the story).

   - The Marine Biologist Sketch can be found on You Tube at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0u8KUgUqprw&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0u8KUgUqprw&feature=related).

4. After showing the Pinky Toe Sketch have your students then view the animated version of this sketch. The animated version of the skit gives them a visual idea of what might occur in the brain of an audience member who is hearing the Pinky Toe story or the Marine Biologist story. By viewing the animated sketches, it will help reinforce the importance of vivid imagery.
• The Pinky Toe Sketch with animation can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA4CO6YxiHU&feature=related

• The Marine Biologist with animation can be found on You Tube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nesbcncEOZM&feature=related

Both of these sketches can also be found on the bonus features section of the DVD.

Additional Follow-Up Activities

1. Divide the students into groups of four or five. Then have the groups create a short story about an inanimate object using Freytag’s Pyramid. Students can complete the story by creating an autobiography of the object involving a crisis the character needs to solve. Groups should strive to create a descriptive, entertaining story that uses figurative language and vivid imagery. This activity will allow them to apply the information they have just learned. The groups should read and share their stories to the rest of the class at the end of the activity. This activity usually requires 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Students really enjoy this activity since it allows them to be highly creative in a group setting.

2. Ask for 3 or 4 volunteers to pick a note card with a famous person, an object, and an item of food listed on it. Give the volunteer students 5 minutes to think about how they can incorporate these three items into a story. Have the students give a short impromptu speech that uses Freytag’s Pyramid and the three items on the note card. Their goal should be to make it believable and cohesive. This reinforces the idea that a good story has to be probable and should have fidelity. The entire class should guess at the end of the speech which famous person, object, and food item was used. This activity should take about 20 minutes. This activity works best with classes that do not exhibit high levels of communication apprehension or public speaking anxiety. As you may observe as an instructor, some classes are more open to creative, impromptu activities than others. I have had both success and failure with this follow up activity.

Conclusion

Precisely because of the listed benefits, incorporating Seinfeld into the storytelling speech assignment pulls my students into the material and casts off apprehension. Students who are not natural storytellers found that by using Freytag’s Pyramid to organize their speeches they were able to more successful when delivering their stories. Secondly, by being able to view excellent storytellers, students appeared to have a better grasp on how to enhance their stories through the use of hand gestures, facial expressions, and vocal variety. Finally, as an instructor, starting with the storytelling assignment in the beginning of the semester has assisted me in introducing other concepts later in the semester including the use persuasive appeals, identification, and transitions. This assignment and activity has been a continual favorite of my students. Therefore, I encourage you to consider using this activity in your communication courses.
References


Group Dynamics: Managing Interpersonal Conflict in the Group Decision Making Process

Brandon J. Semler  
Assistant Professor  
hjsemler@yahoo.com  
Communication Program  
University of Missouri  
Columbia, MO

Stuart A. Schneider  
Assistant Professor  
stuart.schneider@mail.business.und.edu  
College of Business and Public Administration  
University of North Dakota  
Grand Forks, ND

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this activity is to introduce students to group communication concepts, to teach methods of communicating, to expand student awareness of group dynamics, to expand student awareness of group decision-making, and to involve students in group discussions. Providing students with an opportunity to participate in discussion helps students develop an understanding of various dynamics at play in group communication and shows how group communication affects interpersonal relationships. The outcome of the activity is to improve students understanding of group decision making resulting in better decisions, less conflict, and more efficient use of time when working in groups.

Objectives

The objectives of this activity are multifold: to introduce group communication concepts to students, to teach methods of communicating, to expand student awareness of group dynamics, to expand student awareness of group decision-making, and to involve students in group discussions. Providing students with an opportunity to participate in discussion helps students develop an understanding of various dynamics at play in group communication and shows how group communication affects interpersonal relationships.

Courses

This activity works well in many classes and contexts, ranging from introductory group communication courses through advanced business and organizational communication courses. Specific courses to which this activity could be applied include: Organizational communication, business communication, small group, interpersonal, and organizational behavior.
Rationale

Students, including advanced students, often lack knowledge, confidence, and experience to participate, communicate, and effectively make decisions within groups. This activity illustrates group decision making, and gives students experience in a group setting and a better understanding of how to improve communication functions within those groups. The students experience systematic change by learning a more effective decision making process which allows for everyone’s voice and/or opinion to be counted. The functional perspective of small group communication, also known as functional theory, states that group performance is directly related to the communication functions within the group (Hirokawa & Salazar, 1997). Dennis Gouran identified seven assumptions that underlie the functional perspective. One assumption is members of a group are motivated to participate (Gouran & Hirowaka, 2003).

The provided activity for this learning experience illustrates how changing the system/communication function can impact interpersonal dynamics. This is an original activity that illustrates how “ownership” and “buy-in” affect the decision making process.

Ownership and agreement of (concurrence with) decisions usually occur when people are involved in the process of the decisions being made. According to Adams and Galanes (2006), when groups engage in problem solving, they follow certain steps: first, they identify a problem, they identify potential solutions to the problem, and then they choose one solution, best suited to their needs. In this sense, problem solving is viewed as a process (Engleberg & Wynn, 2003). Individuals are more likely to make sure the decision-making process or a decision succeeds when they are invested in the decision (i.e. involved in the decision making process). If you are invested in an idea, you will be more likely to put in any extra effort necessary to ensure the success of the idea.

According to Gemmy (2002), leadership involves the influence one person has over others, and the critical determinant of organizational success is the quality of its leadership. The leadership process involves influencing, motivating, including, and listening to others’ ideas throughout a decision making process. This exercise illustrates how an effective leader, by changing decision making processes, can have a profound influence on those they lead.

A critical piece to this activity is showing the students what ineffective communication is, what groupthink is, as well as, what ineffective leadership is. In addition, this exercise illustrates what effective leadership is. By simply changing the process, by aggregating individual scores, everyone’s voice and/or opinion is part of the decision making process (invested).

Explanation of Activity

Prior to the exercise, the instructor should be covering concepts with students about group dynamics and group decision making. The instructor may also use this activity to lead into leadership lessons and types of leadership styles. The activity will also give participants the opportunity to experience groupthink and an unbalanced amount of win-lose results.
Time Frame

The activity can easily fill a two-hour time period, plus one outside assignment (optional) for students to respond to provided questions.

The instructor should hand out a “Working on the Rail Road” exercise. The Working on the Rail Road exercise is a scenario activity. Participants are to imagine themselves in a management position where they are asked to make critical decisions in the corporate downsizing of “the Rail Road.” The Rail Road is an example of what organizations face when dealing with cutbacks.

Some decisions the participants will make include ranking a list of items according to their importance for achieving corporate downsizing to save the Rail Road, 15 being the most effective downsizing suggestion down to 1 being the least effective. The participants rank the items on their own and then rank the items again as a group.

Before beginning the Working on the Rail Road activity, participants should be instructed to read the directions for the exercise and to fill out answers individually and comment as to why they have made the decisions they have. The instructor should announce that participants have ten minutes to complete this portion of the activity on their own. The instructor should remind the students to comment on why they made the decisions they made, in the appropriate spot on the activity sheet. This will allow support for a participant’s decisions by documenting the reasoning behind the decisions. This should help play a part in minority and majority influence when working with the others in the group.

After students finish the first step, ranking individual suggestions for corporate downsizing, Step 2 of the activity begins. Students are asked to form some sort of consensus as a group and develop one ranked list for the entire group. Initially, students are given minimal instructions; they are simply told, as a group, to rank the 15 items. This is necessary so that when they are given clear directions and are shown a new way/process of decision making they see the difference in the two approaches. Students learn by example that by changing the way/process you make decisions, you can change group dynamics and improve the outcome of a decision.

The instructor should allow time to complete Step 2 (approximately 10-15 minutes). At the 8-minute mark, the instructor should announce the time. The time an instructor chooses may vary according to group sizes and pace of each group, but the idea is to allow time for group dynamics such as; monopolization of conversations, disengagement by those less assertive, lobbying for personal choices while negating the value of other or opposing ideas/choices (confrontation), in general, for disharmony to occur.

Following the group discussion in Step 2, the instructor will ask that the group’s collective ranking be placed aside and the original individual rankings be retrieved. Each person’s suggestions for corporate downsizing will be added to one master list for the group. For each item on the master list, individual rankings for each item will be added together resulting in a group aggregated score for each item. Upon completion of the aggregation, the items can then
be prioritized by identifying the item with the largest aggregated score being the group’s most important suggestion to the smallest aggregated score being the least important.

**Debrief**

The instructor should allow for a discussion following the activity and ask the students what issues arose in their relationships and communication. Upon the completion of the exercise, the instructor should discuss Dewey’s Reflective Think or a specific process orientated decision making model to allow for emphasis on the group decision making process. Another discussion could be on Asch’s Minority and Majority Influence and how it plays a role in group decision making (Asch, 1951). The instructor will ask questions relating to group dynamics that occurred during the activity such as: "Did anyone monopolize the conversation?" "Did anyone, eventually stop participating?" "Was there a time when team members began lobbying for their ideas (highlighting the merits) while explaining the weaknesses of another team member’s ideas (highlighting the weaknesses)?" Next, the instructor will ask the same questions about the process occurring when groups worked to aggregate the scores.

When relating to group discussions with little or no structure, the likely responses to questions from the teacher would be that there was: monopolization of the discussion, disengagement, lobbying for personal viewpoints, and diminishing of opposing viewpoints, etc. Students will probably say, “Yes, all these behaviors occurred.” All of these behaviors have the potential to contribute to interpersonal conflict, to result in poor decisions being made because information from a few students contributed to the decision rather than information from all members of the group, and to miss-gleaning the best aspects of the best ideas being used in the final decision.

In contrast, when relating to group discussions with structure, the likely responses to questions from the teacher would be that the process moved more quickly, no one was allowed to monopolize the conversation, no one was allowed to disengage, and there was little or no lobbying for or against another’s ideas resulting in better decisions, less chance of interpersonal conflict and a more efficient use of time.

**Activity Appraisal**

This activity works well in many classes and contexts, ranging from introductory group communication courses through advanced business and organizational communication courses. This activity expands communication resources, critical thinking skills, problem solving, and group decision making skills. Most importantly, this activity illustrates the effects of changing the process of how a group communicates and shares information and how this change can profoundly affect the behavior of the group. In other words, how changing the communication system changes the outcome.
One limitation of this activity could be that students may not be comfortable openly answering these questions immediately following the activity; so, you may want to consider asking the students to respond to these questions as an after class assignment and then come back to them as a discussion.

Experience indicates that many students have the most difficulty recognizing the need to include everyone’s voice during the activity. Most students will fight for their ideas and engage in conflict or will reluctantly engage in the exercise and let others make decisions for them.

Specific reading material which can be exceptionally helpful to the students for understanding “systematic change,” “group decision making,” and “group dynamics” include: Eisenberg and Goodall (2007), Chapter 4: The Systems Perspective on Organizations and Communication, which addresses systems theory. Also, Chapter 6: Critical Approaches to Organizations and Communication, which examines and opposes the assumptions of the dominant frameworks. This chapter also addresses critical organizational theory, which reveals the persuasive power that organizations have over individuals. Chapter 7: Identity and Difference in Organizational Life, explores how socially constructed differences (including gender, race, and class) are produced through everyday organizing. Finally, Chapter 8: Teams and Networks: Collaboration in the Workplace covers the global emergence of a demand for increased participation in information sharing and decision making.

References and Suggested Readings


Appendix

Working on the Railroad Activity

You are a member of management on the Burt Iron railroad. Due to the impact of the downturn in the economy, the Burt Iron railroad needs to make cuts in order to survive the hard economic times. Major decisions need to happen very quickly to cut cost and save the company. You were originally scheduled to have a couple of months to make decisions, but senior executives have another idea and want decisions to be made today. You have one hour to deliberate and report back to senior management, however, senior management has ruined your original plan and gives you a list of pertinent decisions you must decide from. Only the 15 items below are what you have to choose from.

The survival of the railroad depends on reaching and making the most appropriate decisions to cut costs in a certain order. You cannot, however, cut all items; you must choose the most important items to cut cost in order to save the railroad. Your task is to rank the 15 items in terms of their importance to the railroad survival. Place a number "1" by the item that you believe is Least important, a "2" by the item that is second-least important, and so on through the number "15," which you should place beside the item that you believe is most important.

After you have completed your ranking, answer the following question: Why did you decide on this order for these items?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITEM</th>
<th>YOUR RANKING</th>
<th>GROUP RANK</th>
<th>GROUP RANK (aggregate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early retire 10 employees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lay off 20 employees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce company retirement investment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shut down 10 trains out of 30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invest in solar-powered trains</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build new rail ways</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get new investors and sell stock</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate with employees to ask ways to reduce costs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold off on buying new safety equipment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce employee health care plan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce employee vacation time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sell unused office equipment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce employee pay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remove productivity bonus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase train loads per day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>