

Communication Apprehension in High School Students with Professional Practices

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Abstract

Popularized by McCroskey (1970), the term “communication apprehension” is the broad term that refers to an individual’s “fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons” (McCroskey, 2001, p. 40). Research on high school students has been limited as well as testing on specific programs to decrease communication apprehension in high school students. With this in mind, the authors examined students at a high school program designed to train professional skills were surveyed before and after their training on presentations. Results indicated students associated less anxiety with public speaking after one semester of professional practice instruction.

Public speaking is not a skill that comes naturally to all. After all, McCroskey (2009) found that 70% of Americans report feeling apprehensive about public speaking. Some people have the confidence within their personality, whereas others need to practice being able to speak in front of both large and small group settings. Students during their high school career are an excellent snapshot of the variety of confidence levels a person has naturally versus what needs to be learned and practiced. While most public high schools focus on a variety of skills in the liberal arts tradition, some schools embrace professional or college preparation curriculum.

One such school is the Minnesota Center for Advanced Professional Studies (MNCAPS). This Center is a partnership of education, industry and community, immersing all students in

profession-based learning experiences. At MNCAPS, high school students are given the opportunity to learn professional skills and explore a potential career pathway of interest while receiving the class credit they need in order to graduate. The student body is made up of junior and senior year students who all show interest in a hands on learning environment where they can develop professional skills that they can continue to use after graduation. Each participant is part of a career focused pathway that consists of two to three courses that they attend in the first or second half of their school day. Students fill the other half of their school day with traditional high school classes or often pair MNCAPS with other college credit or work program opportunities. The pathways include: Healthcare (year one); Healthcare (year two); Introduction to Education; Foundations of Business, Marketing, and Analytics; Marketing and Design; and Direct Selling. On top of career focused classes, every student also receives instruction on basic professional skills and is presented with several real life experiences to practice these skills. Such skills and experiences can include: mock interviews, professional meetings, and building professional portfolios.

The communication skills these students get in this program can help them greatly in their future careers. Unfortunately, some research indicates that high-school students may not be receiving effective instruction in public speaking, which would benefit them academically, personally, and professionally (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000). Typically, people first encounter public speaking instruction in their high school education which is crucial for two reasons: First, for students who do not pursue higher education after high school, "elementary and secondary schools represent the only opportunity for formal communication training" (Morreale, Cooper, & Perry, 2000, p. 5); second, for students who do pursue higher education,

effective public speaking instruction at the high school level is necessary to prepare them to succeed in college communication courses.

The reduction of public speaking anxiety (PSA) is a primary concern for many basic communication courses (Kinnick, Holler, & Bell, 2011) and the goal of MNCAPS is to give their students the best career preparation possible. While public speaking is indeed important, reducing all forms of communication apprehension is the goal for a comprehensive business skills program like MNCAPS. This research takes a closer look to see if MNCAPS is able to reduce communication apprehension (including PSA) for students through the curriculum. So we ask the question: Does the MNCAP program effectively reduce communication apprehension for its students?

Literature Review

McCroskey (1970) first used the term “communication apprehension” (CA) and allowed teachers to describe what they saw in many public speaking students. Even though public speaking anxiety (PSA) is still regarded as the most identifiable genre of CA, the research has evolved beyond public speaking and into a variety of communication contexts.

Scholars began studying CA outside the public speaking classroom and found those with more intense communication apprehension can struggle in academic (McCroskey & Anderson, 1976; McCroskey, et. al., 1989), vocational (Baldwin, et. al., 1983; Daly & McCroskey, 1975), and even interpersonal (McCroskey, et. al. 1975) aspects of their lives. For example, McCroskey and Richmond (1979) found that those with high level CA tend to not flourish in organizational settings, citing a decreased chance of good interpersonal relationships and general employment satisfaction.

Public speaking anxiety (PSA) in higher grade level students is a well-researched topic because the majority of communication courses in the United States have a public speaking element (Morreale, Myers, Backlund, & Simonds, 2016). With the goal of speaking anxiety reduction in mind, several institutions have designed their public speaking courses to include common remedies of speech anxiety (Richmond, Wrench, & McCroskey, 2013). The most common elements of anxiety reduction are skills training, exposure therapy, and cognitive modification (Bodie, 2010). Skills training focuses on the competencies inherent within most public speaking courses that are designed to increase speaking ability (Kelly, 1997).

Additionally, research has shown anxiety generally decreases when the speaker is more familiar with their audience (Vevea, Pearson, Child, & Sendlak, 2009).

LeFebvre, et al (2019) studied anxiety levels at the beginning of a communication course versus anxiety levels at the end, with results indicating anxiety decreased significantly by the end of the course. This is a common assessment technique to determine teaching effectiveness for the basic course. At MNCAPS, students are assessed not only on specific coursework but also on professionalism. Professionalism is assessed by instructors as well as professional mentorships and professional relationships through applicable real-world projects. Practicing talking to professionals in multiple formats happens through the semester and students are engaged early on with the importance of growth in these skills. To assess if the MNCAPS program is reducing communication apprehension, this study uses a pre-test and post-test that is often used in basic communication courses.

Method

The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA-24) (McCroskey, 1982) survey was used to measure the CA of the students before and after the semester. The PRCA-24

is the instrument which is most widely used to measure communication apprehension. It is highly reliable (alpha regularly $>.90$) and has very high predictive validity. There are 24 Likert scale prompts which students responded with standard 1-5 ratings based on their feelings (1-strongly disagree, 5-strongly agree). There are 6 prompts assigned to each category: Group Discussions, Meetings, Interpersonal, and Public Speaking. Each category has 3 Positive Association prompts and 3 Negative Association prompts.

After securing IRB approval, participants in the study were recruited through the MNCAPS program, with consent forms being signed by willing parents. The overall enrollment in the program is around 200 high school students, all of whom receive communication training throughout the course of their school year. To ensure previous MNCAPS curriculum did not influence the study, first year students in MNCAPS program were recruited by sharing a survey electronically during class periods early in the semester. No incentive was attached to participation in the survey and all results were anonymous. At the end of the semester after learning and practicing strategies in several professional situations, participants were asked to take the survey again. The aggregate scores were totaled and compared. All results were kept secured online in a password protected account.

Results

A total of 15 students took the survey. Scores for PRCA-24 can range from 24-120. Scores below 51 represent people who have very low CA. Scores ranging 51-80 represent people with average CA. Scores above 80 represent people who have high levels of trait CA. The pre-test average score was 61.55 and the post-test average score was 50.37. Group Discussion CA scores went from 13.55 to 12.00; Interpersonal CA scores went from 13.97 to 12.00; Meetings CA scores went from 15.55 to 11.81; and Public Speaking CA scores went from 18.48 to 14.56.

Overall, the group improved in 23 of the 24 prompts, which calculates to a 96% success rate for improving CA.

Group Discussion was the area with the least amount of improvement. The one prompt where CA scores rose for the entire study was “I like to get involved in group discussions”. Further, the aggregate score changes in Group Discussion was 0.31, which was such a minimal change that 15 of the 24 individual prompts has larger score changes on their own. The prompt “Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions” had the smallest score change with 0.04. The largest individual prompt score change was “I feel relaxed while giving a speech” which came in with a 0.99 score change. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Score Change in PRCA-24

Negative Association Prompts	Score Change	Positive Association Prompts	Score Change
I dislike participating in group discussions.	-0.73	Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.	0.04
I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.	-0.26	I like to get involved in group discussions.	-0.06
Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.	-0.26	I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.	0.33
Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.	-0.75	Usually, I am comfortable when I have to participate in a meeting.	0.20
I am afraid to express myself at meetings.	-0.88	I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.	0.80
Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.	-0.58	I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.	0.53
While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very	-0.06	I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.	0.41

nervous.			
Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.	-0.29	Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.	0.50
I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.	-0.32	While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.	0.39
Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.	-0.65	I have no fear of giving a speech.	0.66
My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.	-0.40	I feel relaxed while giving a speech.	0.99
While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.	-0.27	While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.	0.95

Discussion

The results of the survey indicate that the MNCAPS program effectively reduces communication apprehension for its students. Improvement was shown in all four areas of the survey (Group Discussion, Meetings, Interpersonal, and Public Speaking). The only prompt that's outcome did not follow these trends was "I like to get involved in group discussions"; one contributing factor to this may have been the fact that daily class discussions were done through distance learning. This might also impact the overall low score change in the Group Discussion category. Overall, however, MNCAPS has demonstrated the ability to effectively reduce communication apprehension in its students.

With further research, it would be interesting to see how this same process would affect different age groups in different environments. Decreasing their communication apprehension in order to better themselves in professional speaking engagements such as a simple interview in hopes of reaching whatever goal life has in store for them next. Assessment that is focused on a

specific task or using a specific course or CA reduction training technique would yield more generalized results.

While CA was slightly reduced in this instance, the mental make-up of the students may need to be factored in. If these students select into this specific program, it is possible they already possess higher levels of what Nordin and Broeckelman-Post (2019) call communication mindset, which is a student's belief regarding whether or not their communication skills can be improved. If students in MNCAPS believe they can improve, their CA improvement might be better than the average high school student. Understanding more about the participants would help MNCAPS use the information from this study more effectively. MNCAPS may want to see how students fair after being in the Professional Practices curriculum for longer periods of time. Further research would help assess if a consistent curriculum of Professional Practices would positively affect adults in the work force post-graduation.

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