The Relationship Between the Digital Communication Lab and Student Oral Communication Outcomes

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Beginning in the Fall 2014 semester the Department of Communication Studies began offering sections of Com 101: Digital Communication Lab as a one-credit online co-requisite paired with Critical Issues in Human Inquiry (CIHI) classes in Creighton University’s Magis Core. Com 101 provides content, concepts, and practice in oral communication to prepare students to complete significant oral communication assignments in their CIHI classes at the end of each semester.

Assessment Instruments

Each semester students complete a quantitative and qualitative survey before and after they give their speech in their critical issues course. This survey measures their attitudes towards public speaking and collects data about their activity in the course. This data, in addition to assessment data from University curriculum assessment, helps us to make revisions to the course to aid student achievement of learning outcomes.

Com 101 has three objectives in the Magis Core curriculum:

1. Students will construct and effectively deliver well-structured and supported arguments in... oral [form].
2. Students will research, choose, and use appropriate technologies to communicate effectively.
3. Students will describe basic components of an argument and recognize some common fallacies of arguments and misrepresentations of facts.

We measure the fulfillment of these objective by assessing student performance against standardized rubrics.

Decreased Speech Anxiety

Three elements of the Com 101 and Critical Issues relationship decrease student anxiety ahead of their in-class speeches in Critical Issues classes.

Students were less anxious about speaking in their CIHI classes when they:

1. Sought tutoring in the department’s Communication Center;
2. Completed practice assignments in Com 101 requiring video recording of speeches or practicing speech elements;
3. Completed smaller speaking assignments earlier in the semester in their CIHI classes.

These results emphasize that completing the oral communication objective in the Magis Core Curriculum (Students will construct and effectively deliver well-structured and supported arguments in...oral [form]) requires partnerships among the Com 101 course, CIHI instructors, and the Communication Center.

Increased Speech Anxiety

Our survey also noted that students did become more anxious about presentations when instructors emphasized assignment requirements or when peer feedback or instructor feedback is part of assignment design. Further, students were also likely to feel more anxious because many lacked practice with a live or face-to-face audience. While it is difficult to eliminate these elements from assignment design, it does suggest that early opportunities to speak in low-stakes environments can help students develop skills without directly applying specific speech/delivery requirements or having peer feedback.

Communication Centers

Communication centers exist in colleges and universities across the United States. These centers are relatively similar to services provided in the Creighton EDGE or the Writing Center, however communication centers specifically provide additional public speaking resources to students. Tutoring focuses on topic exploration, outline development, source citation, visual aid enhancement, lowering speech anxiety, speech review, and public speaking practice with trained communication consultants (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012). Such centers allow expanded practice opportunities for students due to increased class sizes and help support common core curricula at colleges and universities. Students often have limited opportunities to formally practice oral presentations before delivering speeches in classrooms (Rothman, 2013) and coaching in communication centers help fill this need.

Implications for Practice

Students can gain much from not only communication center coaching, but learning how to succeed in online public speaking education. Basic communication courses are vital to students’ success both in college and beyond as these courses teach “critical thinking, meaning making, argument development, persuasion theory, gestural nuance, and so on” (Lind, 2012, p. 164). When presenting in an online environment, speakers should:

1. Actively participate in all online and in-class speaking activities
2. Practice before recording or participating in a live-stream presentation.
4. Establish eye contact for at least 70% of the presentation (Birkholt, 2015).
5. Utilize campus resources: instructors, communication tutoring, and peers.
6. Apply Eloquenta Perfecta, the Jesuit tradition of the good person speaking well (Mailloux, 2013). Be confident, cite accurate information, and achieve good in our society.