

Alumni Insights from the Communication Classroom

Rebecca Ray
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

The University Speaking Center (USC) alumni who continue on to be teachers a unique role in the success and engagement of the student body at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). This study focused on two alumni who are currently teaching or have taught the introduction to communication studies course at this university. Through my observations of these alumni, I discovered specific ways in which the USC has shaped the effectiveness of their pedagogy.

Because I am a communication scholar and a managing consultant in the USC, the insights provided by these alumni challenged me to think about how my communication degree extends beyond the information I have been taught in my course work. In this essay, I argue that USC alumni who become teachers implement an alternative pedagogy inside and outside the classroom that adapts to the needs of others, making them a vital aspect of communication pedagogy in the university.

In order to collect data, I observed alumni when they were either teaching a class or facilitating a workshop. I took observational notes on the teaching style as well as the audience's behavior in order to see whether or not they were engaging with the teachers and understanding the material. I measure engagement as verbal and nonverbal participation with the teacher and other students. In order to observe the USC pedagogy, I specifically looked at techniques such as SOFTEN, adaptable delivery, and decentering of knowledge.

SOFTEN (Smiling, Open Posture, Forward Leaning, Taking Notes, Eye Contact, and Nodding) is a nonverbal technique used to demonstrate active listening (Cuny, Wilde, & Stevens, 2012, p. 249-256). SOFTEN technique is a way to see if students are engaging, which can help teachers decide if they need to implement adaptable delivery. Based on my research in communication studies I am coining the term adaptable delivery can be defined as the ability to verbally or nonverbally modify material while presenting information to make it more understandable to the audience. Biech (2017) advises facilitators to “constantly read your audience to find out whether you’re meeting their needs” (p. 14). Adapting the delivery is necessary for creating an environment conducive to retaining and applying information (Biech, 2017).

Student learning is related to a teachers ability to adjust the environment to reflect a safe space. Decentering the classroom or source of knowledge refers to how alumni create a collaborative space that breaks down hierarchy and recognizes everyone's potential to provide insight to the conversation. These tools are taught to alumni when they take the USC theory and practice course students are required to take to become consultants.

To understand the value of this research, I have analyzed the goals, methods, and strategies of traditional public speaking teaching models in contrast to the model used by the USC alumni. Traditional pedagogy relies on the banking system of

education which is, “metaphorized by teachers as depositors of knowledge and students as depositories of knowledge,” which completely contrasts the USC mission of decentering knowledge (Pensouneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2012, p. 42). Comparing elements from both models can provide a better understanding of how teachers with communication center training have certain skills that others may lack.

There are various factors that are out of a teacher’s control when leading students. The classroom structure could prohibit student collaboration, depending on the existing setup, and may not be something that can be altered. Also the number of students is often controlled by the university. Therefore, teachers may not be able to attend to each student individually in larger classrooms. Another common issue is the use of technology, such as students using personal devices or teachers experiencing technical difficulties with classroom electronics. All of these situations mentioned can affect the general attitude of students and may influence their work ethic or willingness to interact with their professor. Techniques like SOFTEN, adaptable delivery, and decentering of knowledge can be used to facilitate a collaborative environment for students.

The SOFTEN technique is meant to show audiences that a speaker is actually listening by using their nonverbal behaviors. For example, one of the Alumni I worked with a large number of students in an introductory science course. Students generally enrolled in introductory classes are most likely Freshmen and Sophomores who had little experience with public speaking. During a workshop, the USC alumni showed the use of the SOFTEN technique when interacting with students and the classroom instructor. She walked around the room to get closer to whomever was speaking and made eye contact with them while they were

talking. While doing this more students began interacting by answering questions and participating in the activities during the workshop.

After observing USC alumni who are now teachers, I learned that for students to be perceptive about learning communication concepts, whether it is topics such as public speaking or in interpersonal relationships, teachers must be willing to adapt. In comparison to the banking model of education, USC alumni place an emphasis on terminology usage and the role of the teacher, which resist the traditional hierarchical structure of the classroom. Staff at the USC have always highlighted the importance of providing feedback in a safe space that promotes growth.

Another alumni I observed also placed a heavy emphasis on decentering the classroom by the way she assembled the room and encouraged students to collaborate with their peers. I observed a workshop called “Let’s Talk” with students from the Joint School of Nanoscience and Nanoengineering. One of the USC alumni worked with them on how to effectively present their research to different audiences. The desks were set up like a square with an open space in the middle. When playing a game or presenting his/ her project, the open space in the middle was designed for speakers to capture the audience’s attention. This way everyone was able to collaborate in a more relaxed setting. This provides everyone an opportunity to occupy a space of confident speaking at different times.

Proper training at the USC can make a significant impact on student success, especially if the staff continues on to teach communication courses and/or workshops. By examining the roles of students, consultants, and former consultants who are now teachers we can have a better understanding of the overall impact of the center in order for continual growth and to

ensure the goals of creating a space of no judgement and collaborative learning are met.

References

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