

## Journalistic Techniques in Communication Centers

Erin Ellis-Harrison  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

### Abstract

Communication centers offer speakers an opportunity to engage in a tutoring experience (consultation) where students work with a trained consultant who can help brainstorm, organize, and refine their oral presentation. Consultants working in communication centers are often faced with the issue of how to engage their speaker during the consultation. In this article, the author discusses how communication center consultants can employ journalistic techniques to engage students in the critical thinking process. Four techniques employed by journalists during an interview that communication center consultants can implement into their consultations are: begin with the easy questions, maintain self-control, listen and listen well, and take nothing at face value. Consultants providing students with feedback on brainstorming and organization can best implement these techniques and offer a way to critically think about a speech and allow the speaker to take on an active role in the learning environment.

*Keywords:* communication centers, journalism, critical thinking

### Introduction

Faculty on college campuses recognize that students will need effective oral communication competencies to succeed in their future careers. In a survey of 63,924 hiring managers, 46% rated communication skills as lacking in new graduates (Strauss, 2016). Communication centers help bridge this gap and help students acquire the soft skills that are necessary in almost every career field, because they are focused on improving oral communication skills, they serve a critical function on college campuses (Atkins-Sayre, 2012).

Literature on communication centers is rooted in the disciplines of education, English (rhetoric and writing centers), and psychology. Communication centers adapted the peer teaching model of writing centers and applied that model to the review of oral discourse (Turner & Sheckels, 2015). Just as writing centers understand the need to

innovate to maintain the level of intellectual exchange and curiosity (Carpenter, 2016), so do communication centers. Writing centers do offer guidance and structure for communication centers, but the field of journalism can also offer knowledge and new practices for communication center consultants. Communication centers often include many aspects of communication studies but research emerging from journalism, a branch of communication studies, is rarely integrated into the practices used in these centers. Techniques from broadcast journalism have the potential to broaden the scope of literature applicable for communication centers. Consultants can employ journalistic techniques in consultations to engage students in the critical thinking process.

Critical thinking is essential in journalism because journalists must obtain information from a source and create an engaging story from the information gathered. In communication centers, oral

communication of ideas can provide an important point of entry into critical thinking. Centers that are devoted to improving students' abilities in oral communication can become an integral part of the critical thinking learning process (Atkins-Sayre, 2012). In the academic context, critical thinking allows students to build knowledge in an independent and informed way and make them better prepared to transition into the job market (Franco, Almeida, & Saiz, 2014).

## **Literature Review**

**What is a Communication Center Consultant?** Since the 1980s, peer tutoring programs have flourished nationwide at institutions of higher education (Wilson, 2012). Consultants working in communication centers provide peer feedback that can supplement classroom instruction, clarify course material, and provide a safe environment for speakers seeking oral communication assistance (Bell & Morreale, 2015). They are trained to review assignment requirements, listen to the needs of students seeking their assistance, and provide feedback for improvement (Yook, 2006). Peer tutoring is a central part of education because the act of talking through an argument with a peer enhances the critical thinking process as it allows a student to examine their argument, think about the best language to describe the argument, and clarify points that are internally clear but not clear to the audience (Atkins-Sayre, 2012).

Communication center consultants also seek to build relationships with their speakers to make them feel that they are listened to and understood. Empathetic listening is critical to build positive relationships between a consultant and a speaker. This skill involves acknowledging the other, resisting distractions, keeping an

open mind, analyzing nonverbal behaviors, and summarizing content (Burley-Allen, 1995). Skilled listeners can help create a comfortable environment that encourages the speaker to express their fears and frustrations related to their oral communication competencies (Cuny, Wilde, & Stevens, 2012). The time spent to create a positive learning environment allows for the speaker to experience personal growth and a sense of achievement which can lead to positive feelings in their public speaking competencies (Lawson, 2009).

**What Happens During a Consultation?** Most consultations last between 15-60 minutes and focus on brainstorming, organization, practicing, or reviewing an already delivered speech. The consultant poses questions and offers feedback by identifying problems with suggestions for possible solutions (Turner & Sheckels, 2015). Brainstorming consultations focus on audience analysis/adaptation and how to approach the topic from a variety of viewpoints (Atkins-Sayre, 2012). Consultants can help the speaker to think about who they will speak to, what will impact their audience, and what will motivate others to listen to their speech. If the speaker is past the brainstorming phase, the consultant can focus on organization and help the student research credible sources, organize their main points, and help create a speaking outline. Conversations should focus on critical thinking questions on the purpose and goal of the presentation, obstacles the speaker may encounter in reaching their goal, flawed reasoning, and implications (Atkins-Sayre, 2012). Critically thinking about a speech will develop and strengthen the speakers' argument. Consultants may also encounter speakers who want more advanced help and preparation in order to refine their oral competencies.

Conversations for advanced speakers will involve preparing them for on-the-spot adaptations of their speech and helping students become self-reflective (Atkins-Sayre, 2012). Consultants engage with speakers in one-on-one consultations just as journalists engage with a source during an interview.

**What Does a Journalist Do?** A journalist needs to know how to get information, analyze, evaluate, and communicate it in a way that informs and interests the audience (De Burgh, 2000). All journalists are trained to ask questions, uncover information and write the most complete story possible (Itule & Anderson, 2007). A consultant must be able to help speakers locate sources for a speech, investigate holes in the research and/or argument, and discuss strategies on how to communicate that information to their intended audience. In addition to obtaining information, a journalist must also be accurate, explanatory, and vivid or moving in their language choice (De Burgh, 2008). A story is successful not just because it is deemed newsworthy, but because it is communicated in such a way that the general public can understand, identify with, and feel a personal connection to the content and/or people. Consultants working in a communication center help speakers not just create a speech, but offer feedback and strategies on how to communicate that message to a targeted audience.

A journalist who writes an in-depth story should follow some basic guidelines: always know before an interview which questions are to be answered or which major topics are to be covered, cultivate sources, be careful and check every word, and strive to be fair (Itule & Anderson, 2007). In addition to guidelines for writing stories, journalists also have guidelines for controlling the interview. Bloch & Miller

(1978) focus on guidelines for beginners that show him or her how to handle issues inherent in the nature of in-depth reporting. While there are many guidelines for journalists and constant new guidelines with the emergence of technology and digital media, the basics are still the same and still applicable.

A journalist must: 1) *begin the interview with easy questions* then lead gradually to the real subject; 2) *maintain self-control* by not becoming emotionally involved and always being polite; 3) *control the interview* and ask questions that do not put the source off-guard but rather give the opportunity to speak freely; 4) *identify as a reporter* when questioning a source directly or asking personal questions; 5) *listen and listen well* by not interrupting to offer personal opinions, or being so concerned with questions that responses are missed; and 6) *take nothing at face value* and always be skeptical of people's motives and who they are connected to (Bloch & Miller, 1978; Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Mencher, 2000). These guidelines are not just applicable to journalists, but also to others who conduct interviews or one-on-one sessions whose goal is to obtain information. Communication center consultants can utilize some of the same guidelines journalists use for writing stories and conducting interviews to create a more inviting atmosphere and help speakers critically think about their presentation.

### **Application**

One of the goals of a tutoring session is a continuous stream of exchanges between a consultant and speaker (Chi, 1996). Consultants shape feedback based on students' questions and main concerns. The job of a consultant requires constant reinvention (Carpenter, 2016). A constant challenge for communication center

consultants is to find ways to keep the speaker invested, engaged, and encourage critical thinking about the speech assignment.

Techniques used by journalists when conducting interviews can be applied to the work done by consultants in communication center consultations. Journalism focuses on interpersonal relationships, seeking answers, and thinking critically about information which align seamlessly with the work done by consultants in communication centers. Of the many approaches used by journalists, there are four that apply to the work done in communication centers. The first three techniques are for consultants to adopt while the last technique is for the speaker to adopt. Each technique can help build and tell the main story. In this application, the story is an oral presentation.

**Begin with the Easy Questions.** In journalism, the tone and pace of the interview sets the overall experience of an interview. When a journalist arrives and begins to talk, their first questions are the easy ones and are traditionally organized in a funnel sequence. The funnel sequence begins with open-ended questions which usually relaxes the interviewee and gives the journalist a chance to listen and learn more about their interviewee (Hamilton, 2011). Gradually, journalists ask more specific questions which can lead to the real subject through the little pieces of information that build upon one another (Bloch & Miller, 1978). When applied to a communication center, a consultant would start the consultation by asking their speaker the easy questions such as:

- “How is it going?”
- “How are classes?”
- “What is the speech assignment?”

Then, the consultant should ease into asking the more difficult questions such as:

- “What is the purpose of the speech?”
- “Why was the organizational pattern chosen?”
- “What sources back up the evidence?”

A consultant can help relax the speaker if their first questions can be easily answered. It allows the consultant to create an initial positive interaction with the speaker and build on their interests and motivations to create a more complete picture of what the speaker wants their presentation to look and sound like.

**Maintain Self-Control.** When a journalist is conducting an interview, he or she must be aware of their demeanor and must maintain self-control. Self-control is not exemplified by abrasiveness or rudeness but rather by politeness. It is much easier to ask questions about matters not understood by the journalist if the initial approach was smooth (Bloch & Miller, 1978). Communication center consultants should use specific immediacy behaviors to help control their demeanor and maintain self-control. Immediacy behaviors are the behaviors that communicate psychological closeness and positive affect. Greater immediacy is due to increasing degrees of physical proximity and/or increasing perceptual availability of the communicator to the receiver (Mehrabian, 1969). A consultant should face the speaker, occasionally nod (Turner & Scheckels, 2015), maintain comfortable eye contact, demonstrate pleasing facial expressions while speaking and listening (to communicate caring), and display an open posture (Cuny, Wilde & Stevens, 2012). These immediacy behaviors can help to control a consultants’ demeanor and give the perception of closeness.

Consultants should be cognizant of their demeanor especially when a speaker appears anxious, frustrated, or unmotivated because emotion is every bit as important to the public as reason (Ryfe, 2017). Taking notes during a practice consultation can signal to a speaker that the consultant is listening and taking the task seriously, taking too many notes can cause an anxious speaker to be more nervous because the speaker might think that there are many things wrong with their speech (Turner & Sheckels, 2015). A consultant who is immediate throughout, and not just in the initial minutes, will more likely engage the speaker for the duration of the consultation. An engaged speaker is more apt to take an active role in the consultation to look online and search for articles that support their argument, rework basic transitions into more eloquent phrases, and take a critical look at the organization and composition of the speech. Controlling one's demeanor is more applicable for consultants who work with speakers during a brainstorming or organization consultation because they sit side-by-side to collaboratively explore the topic and arrange ideas into a working outline.

**Listen and Listen Well.** A journalist must listen well because an attentive ear can catch nuances which may need clarification. Journalists should encourage the interviewee with active listening, head nods and murmurs; rather than a constant barrage of questions. Listening well also enables a good reporter to catch suspicious answers or honest errors (Bloch & Miller, 1978). Listening is a fundamental competency to communication centers. A center's ethos can depend on how well it knows how to practice this part of the communication process. Listening is needed in order build trust and provide credibility to the campus community (Yook, 2006) but listening also

builds trust between the consultant and the speaker.

Listening well means consultants follow the 70/30 rule (used often for conducting information interviews). In a consultation, the consultant should listen for 70% of the time and speak for only 30% (Beebe & Mottet, 2016). The consultants' speaking time should focus on asking questions of content clarity and depth, paraphrasing information heard/learned, and giving feedback and guidance on the next steps to get the speaker closer to their goal(s). Listening well in a consultation can help the consultant to notice main points that should be combined, the overuse of words or phrases, and unnecessary information that does not contribute to the thesis.

Nonverbal communication is critical to listening well. A consultant should maintain eye contact, jot down notes of the speakers' main ideas, nod their head occasionally, and maintain open posture by leaning forward slightly with uncrossed arms. Listening is often an overlooked component of effective communication and in order to do it well and clearly understand another persons' views, consultants must listen with their ears, focus mentally on the message, communicate interest with their body language, and ask questions of clarity. When a speaker is made to feel heard and understood, he or she might be more likely to actively participate in the consultation and engage with the consultant when asked to think critically about their speech.

**Take Nothing at Face Value.** A recent analysis of scholarly journals and publishers discovered over 900 potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers and over 800 potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access journals (Beall, 2016). It is important for students to understand how to find credible information and how to

investigate the trustworthiness of sources. Learning the importance of double checking sources can also make students better consumers of information and create students who develop a lifelong commitment to approaching learning from a critical perspective (Atkins-Sayre, 2012).

In news reporting, journalists approach sources through an investigative lens to verify that the information they are receiving is authentic and true (De Burgh, 2008). True journalism is about scrutiny. Scrutiny applies forensic skills to what we have been told (De Burgh, 2000). Fact checking sources takes time and journalists are aware that truthful answers might not always come with the first attempt. Journalists must fact check sources because all significant facts are attributed to a source (Ryfe, 2017).

Speakers should check the credibility of their sources before submitting an outline or delivering their speech because verification should come before information is published (Ryfe, 2017). In sessions that focus on organization, consultants could model how to check the credibility of an author by searching online library-provided tools such as a web-based article index, full-text electronic journal, or library catalogues and discussing the differences between popular and scholarly information with their speaker. Scholarly articles easily accessed through a university library can create a collaborative learning environment where the speaker takes control of their learning and critically evaluates the results from the search engine or database.

## **Discussion**

Communication centers routinely guide speakers in the art of critical thinking (Atkins-Sayre, 2012) and journalistic techniques have the potential to positively influence the work done within these

centers. A well cultivated critical thinker can raise vital questions and problems and formulate them clearly and precisely, gather and assess relevant information, and communicates effectively with others in figuring out solutions to problems (Paul & Elder, 2009). When applied to a communication center, a consultant can better guide the speaker to think critically about their organizational choices, quality of sources, and establish a clear vision for their speech. When students are an active and critical component of the learning process, the consultant is no longer dependent upon their own knowledge and training. The consultant and student can then form more of a partnership that allows them to share ideas that work toward the completion of the task (Timmerman, 2015).

Journalistic techniques can be used in brainstorming consultations to encourage critical thinking to help speakers generate ideas for their speech topic and question the validity of supporting evidence. In an organizational consultation, the techniques can be used to encourage the source (speaker) to “tell all” and find the most impactful information to create a meaningful presentation for the intended audience. Assisting speakers to create their own examples and explanations may also help the consultant to monitor their own understanding of information, help generate better explanations, or further revise their knowledge (Roscoe & Chi, 2008).

Peer tutoring is a valuable experience for both sides. The student being tutored is given a chance to learn from someone else who may use different language, methods, examples and the student doing the tutoring strengthens his/her own grasp of the concepts and reinforces his/her knowledge of key principles by explaining them to someone else (Bell & Morreale, 2015). In a communication center, consultants also

learn from their interactions because peer tutoring provides consultants with the opportunity to refine their own communication skills, attitudes, and knowledge while helping others (Wilson, 2012). Expanding the repertoire of techniques consultants can use, will lead to more ways to engage the speaker and make the consultation richer. Communication centers and the guided conversations that they provide become a vital component of training students to think critically (Atkins-Sayre, 2012).

### Conclusion

Consultants working at a communication center are taught oral communication pedagogy and how to provide peer-to-peer feedback. Although consultants have knowledge of oral communication, engaging a speaker requires an interpersonal connection and added knowledge of how to motivate others to participate in their own learning. Journalists know first-hand how to obtain information from a source and to create an engaging interview to maintain an interpersonal connection. Just as society challenges educators to think of innovative ways to inspire students to take initiative and persist to success (Crone & MacKay, 2007), so too can journalistic techniques provide new avenues for consultants to engage students in the critical thinking process.

### References

Atkins-Sayre, W. (2012). Speaking our minds: Communication centers and critical thinking. In Yook, E. & Atkins-Sayre, W. (Eds.), *Communication centers and oral communication programs in higher education: Advantages, challenges,*

*and new directions* (pp. 13-22). Lanham, MD: Lexington.

- Beall, J. (2016). Beall's list of predatory publishers 2016. Retrieved from <https://scholarlyoa.com/2016/01/05/bcalls-list-of-predatory-publishers-2016/>
- Bell, C., & Morreale, S. (2015). Foreword. In W. Atkins-Sayre & E. Yook (Eds.), *Communicating advice: Peer tutoring and communication practice* (pp. xi-xv). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Burley-Allen, M. (1995). *Listening: The forgotten skill: A self-teaching guide* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Beebe, S. A., & Mottet, T. P. (2016). *Business and professional communication: Principles and Skills for leadership* (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Bloch, J., & Miller, K. (1978). *Investigative and in-depth reporting*. New York, NY: Hastings House.
- Carpenter, R. (2016). Shaping the future: Writing centers as creative multimodal spaces. *Southern Discourse in the Center: A Journal of Multiliteracy and Innovation*, 21(1), 56-75.
- Chi, M. T. H. (1996). Constructing self-explanations and scaffolded explanations in tutoring. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 10, 33-49.
- Clayman, S., & Heritage, J. (2002). *News interview: Journalists and public figures on the air*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Crone, I., & MacKay, K. (2007). Motivating today's college students. *Peer Review*, 9(1), 18-21.

- Cuny, K. M., Wilde, S. M., & Stevens, A. V. (2012). Using empathetic listening to build relationships at the center. In Yook, E. & Atkins-Sayre, W. (Eds.), *Communication centers and oral communication programs in higher education: Advantages, challenges, and new directions* (pp. 249-256). Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- De Burgh, H. (Ed.) (2000). *Investigative journalism: Context and practice*. London: Routledge.
- De Burgh, H. (2008). *Investigative journalism* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Franco, A. R., Almeida, L. S., & Saiz, C. (2014). Critical thinking: Reflections about its place in higher education. *Educatio Siglo XXI*, 32(2), 81-96.
- Hamilton, C. (2011). *Communicating for results: A guide for business and the professions*. (9th ed). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Itule, B. D. & Anderson, D. A. (2007). *News writing and reporting for today's media* (11th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
- Lawson, K. (2009). *The trainer's handbook* (Updated ed.). San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.
- Mehrabian, A. (1969). Some referents and measures of nonverbal behavior. *Behavioral Research Methods and Instrumentation*, 1, 213-217.
- Mencher, M. (2000). *News reporting and writing* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Harper Perennial.
- Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2009). *The miniature guide to critical thinking: Concepts and tools* (6th ed.). Tomales, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.
- Roscoe, R. D., & Chi, M. T. H. (2008). Tutor learning: The role of explaining and responding to questions. *Instructional Science*, 36(4), 321-350.
- Ryfe, D. M. (2017). *Journalism and the public: Key concepts in journalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Strauss, K. (2016). *These are the skills bosses say new college grads do not have*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/karstensastrauss/2016/05/17/these-are-the-skills-bosses-say-new-college-grads-do-not-have/#671559a9596e>
- Timmerman, C. E. (2015). Peer tutoring and customer service: Students as "partial employees". In W. Atkins-Sayre & E. Yook (Eds.), *Communicating advice: Peer tutoring and communication practice* (pp. 261-275). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Turner, K. J., & Sheckels, T. F. (2015). *Communication Centers: A theory-based guide to training and management*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Wilson, S. (2012). The role becomes them: Examining communication center alumni experiences. In E. Yook & W. Atkins-Sayre (Eds.), *Communication centers and oral communication programs in higher education: Advantages, challenges, and new directions* (pp. 55-70). Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Yook, E. L. (2006). Assessment as meta-listening at the communication center. *International Journal of Listening*, 20(1), 66-68.