A Writing Center Collaboration with a Hybrid Introduction to Public Speaking Course

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Introduction

Diana George and John Trimbur (1999), in their history of the uneasy relationship between the disciplines of Communication and Composition, predicted, for the Conference on College Composition and Communication, that “the signifier communication is more than a trickster figure, [it is] the sign of difference that will keep things unstable and shape-shifting” (p. 697). Although some institutions have moved away from “English 101” (writing) and “Communication 101” (speaking) models into a “First Year Seminar” course blending the two communication “skills,” many institutions, mirroring disciplinary histories, maintain “public speaking” as the domain of Communication and “writing” as the domain of English. In such courses, one would likely find the slippage of communication—instructors of “writing” requiring oral presentations and instructors of “public speaking” requiring writing assignments.

Yet, without interdisciplinary sharing of research-based pedagogical practices between Composition and Communication Studies, even courses with such inclusive efforts risk privileging one skill over the “other.” Logically, the instructor will be more familiar with best practices for teaching the “skill” of his/her discipline while the second “skill” is sometimes glossed over. Therefore, this pedagogical manuscript explores the integration of pedagogical practices from the discipline of Composition into a hybrid (classroom/online) Communication introduction to public speaking course.

This manuscript overviews the class which integrates an alternative physical space for writing instruction, specifically a variation of the Studio Approach by Rhonda Grego and Nancy Thompson (2007), into a hybrid public speaking course. The course, taught by a Communication scholar, uses written assignments and the writing/research process to support the primary goal: oral communication proficiency.

It should be noted that although the course plays off Grego and Thompson’s (2007) Studio Approach by providing a facilitated small group supplement to the physical and virtual classrooms, a key difference is that students met in small peer groups, facilitated by a writing center consultant, with others in the same course and section. The consultants facilitated group meetings three times during the semester, almost doubling the course’s physical meeting times, to complement the physical and virtual coursework. The group meetings particularly focused on preparing students to write an informative overview essay of a current event and transition that topic into the student’s Persuasive Speech.
Writing Centers as Collaborative Communication Space

Writing centers can play a crucial role in multimodal communication instruction. Simply put, writing centers are alternative spaces for composing. Yet, questions often surround defining writing center spaces. Jackie McKinney (2009) argued that writing centers must embrace the new ways students compose, expanding their purview from the page to the multimodal sphere. This move in the field’s thinking about teaching writing impacted the writing center director who ultimately approached the communication instructor to engage in a collaborative effort.

In order for this collaborative project to succeed it was imperative that the undergraduate writing center consultants possess a thorough understanding of multimodal communication instruction. To expand the undergraduate writing consultants’ competencies in understanding multimodal communication (oral, written, and visual) and to enhance students’ rhetorical flexibility, a writing center at a small Midwestern private university reached out to a hybrid introduction to public speaking course instructor to facilitate small peer groups. What has emerged thus far are peer learning communities within the course, new campus partnerships, and the changing identity of the campus Writing Center.

Compositionists recognize the necessity of alternative physical and virtual spaces for writing instruction through research and support of writing centers, class peer reviews, and, peer writing cohorts. In addition, Catherine Gouge (2011) noted the logical institutional push for hybrid (physical/online) courses and, in a generally supportive tone, called for more research on successful and unsuccessful approaches to hybrid courses. The hybrid introduction to public speaking course is an ideal setting for all parties involved to grapple with rhetorical questions of audience, genre, stance, and purpose. To encourage effective integration of multimodal communication, the course used written assignments and the writing/research process to support multimodal communication proficiency. Ultimately the coursework prepared students for four speeches: Introductory, Demonstration, Informative, and Persuasive.

Course Design

The basic structure of the course follows. During four physical class meetings, students presented their speeches, which are the major assignments. The speeches are supported through written assignments. Along with discussion board forums on the university Learning Management System, Moodle, and submitted personal essays, students prepared formal and speaking outlines for the four separate speeches: Introductory (Students chose three objects to use as visual aids that reflect who they were in the past, are in the present, and hope to be in the future.), Demonstration (Students physically demonstrated how to do something.), Informative (Students conveyed meaningful information about an issue in current events/culture and gave a simulated assignment progress report), and Persuasive (Students presented a call
to action, their proposed solution to the current issue and organize the speech so as to change or reinforce the beliefs, attitudes, or values of the audience. Like many English 101 courses, the speeches asked students to build from the immediate and personal into a complex argument. Unlike many English 101 courses, students are required to, and will be graded upon, their attempts to relate to an actual audience through oral communication.

To support the process of creating both the informative and persuasive speeches, prior to the informative speech, students chose a current event topic that represented a national or global problem and wrote a four to six page academic essay. The essay required background on the topic, an articulation of the problem, the student’s position, and possible solutions to solve the problem. In their small groups for the first meeting, the writing center consultant guided students through the initial research stages. At the third meeting, the focus was to radically revise this essay in order to create formal outlines for the informative and persuasive speeches. The writing assignments allowed students to view writing as inquiry and part of a larger process. The overall objective of the small groups was to facilitate collaborative learning (Harris, 2012) and support students through their written inquiries.

The students met with their writing center facilitated small groups at various stages of the assignment process (i.e. understanding assignments, researching and narrowing topics, creating outlines, revising drafts, and transforming essays into speeches). The learning outcomes for students were: work collaboratively with peers by giving and receiving feedback on written and oral communication, develop a sense of audience for written and oral communication, and make rhetorical choices determined by the differences between written and oral communication. Conversely, the goals for the writing center were: facilitate feedback, discussion, and collaboration, provide feedback for written and oral communication, and improve relations between the School of Communication and the Writing Center.

The peer group meetings were a critical component of the course. Of the three Writing Center meetings only one was in class. The final two meetings were scheduled by each peer group and consisted of purposeful instruction during the writing and speaking process. The first Writing Center facilitated endeavor, the only “in-class” meeting, occurred on the same evening as the student Demonstration Speeches and addressed the navigation of the beginning of the research process. Specifically, students and writing center consultants discussed choosing an appropriate topic, defining research questions, and finding relevant and credible sources. The second and third meetings did not occur during class time; groups were required to schedule their own Writing Center appointments. Unlike the first gathering, the second facilitated group meeting consisted of students bringing 1-2 pages of their Current Event Essay for writing center review. The consultant and peer group helped “trouble-shoot,” identify problem areas, and helped with the location of academic and credible resources. The third meeting, focused on the tran-
sition from the written and informative to the oral and persuasive. Students were directed to bring their persuasive speech outlines to the third meeting.

Data Collection

The instructor and the Writing Center Director are now in the data collection phase. It is hypothesized that students participating in the facilitated small groups will ultimately be more successful in their speeches (formal oral communication). In addition, the instructor and Writing Center Director believe students will improve, via the peer-review process, in four key areas outlined by Patron (2002): awareness of writing as a process, sense of audience, critical reading skills, and interpersonal skills. The IRB-approved methods for assessment will include: end-of-semester survey of students, reports from the writing center consultants after each meeting, interviews with the writing center consultants, and the written and oral coursework submitted by students.

This project has several practical implications. Among them, first and foremost, is the continued attempt to bring together Composition and Communication. Second, the collaborative nature of this Hybrid Public Speaking Course and the Writing Center may serve as a precursor or example for future institutional relationships. Ultimately, effectively utilizing collaborative space, like a writing center, in communication courses may enhance the multimodal communication skills training and content understanding of the 21st century student. Further, the collaboration will help expand the writing center’s ability to assist other students who voluntarily visit for multimodal compositions.

References


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