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Overcoming Speech and Library Anxiety

Rozanne Leppington, *James Madison University*

Rebecca S. Feind, *San Jose State University*



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Overcoming Speech and Library Anxiety

Rozanne Leppington, James Madison University, VA
Rebecca Feind, San Jose State University, CA

Leppington, Ph.D., is Instructor of Communication in the School of Communication Studies, and Feind, MLS, is Reference and Outreach Librarian at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Library.

Abstract

Students at higher education institutions need to learn how to use the library and to give public speaking presentations, and most will experience Speech and or Library Anxiety. We review Library and Speech Anxiety, and a collaboration between librarians and faculty that produced a freshman course Library Demonstration Assignment. We describe its generation, implementation, and refinement and its effectiveness in preparing students to use the library and to practice public speaking with confidence.

Introduction

Recently, a librarian and a faculty member in Communication Studies at James Madison University produced a course assignment that combines library skills with public speaking. During a faculty enhancement workshop, the librarian asked faculty to design a course assignment that would introduce the students to the library. Since the faculty member was familiar with library anxiety herself, she was well motivated to design something other than the usual "scavenger hunt". According to Constance Mellon, who first presented a definition and grounded theory of Library Anxiety in 1986, 75 to 85% of the students in the sample group "described their initial response to library research in terms of fear" (Mellon, 1986). Onwuegbuzie and Bostick (2004) provide a thorough review of the background and state of research on Library Anxiety. Peer learning is well recognized as an effective method for helping students to learn concepts through exchange. As Sampson and Cohen (2001) state, "The learning exchange is a way that students can develop their skills while learning from the presentation content and processes used by their peers" (p. 45). By placing the students in the real situation of peer teaching in the library, this assignment replaced their anxiety with familiarity.

One study showed about 85% of the population fears public speaking (Motley, 1991). 70% of the population experiences moderately high to very high speech anxiety (Richmond & McCroskey, 1989). One in four individuals will "avoid classes that require oral presentations, skip meetings, refuse job promotions, or even change jobs or occupations to escape public speaking. . . . Simply put, you need a clear plan for managing your speech anxiety, and the most effective plan begins to take shape very early in the public speaking process" (Rothwell, 2004). Practice and preparation are keys to this assignment which places strong emphasis on cooperative learning and preparation during 4 weeks prior to the actual public speaking.

Information Literacy and General Education

The Information Literacy program at James Madison University is very strong. Librarian-led instruction sessions are reserved for courses in the majors, but an online tutorial is provided to students in first year courses. The tutorial called Go for the Gold is assigned in the General Education Speech Communication courses. This prepares students to pass the Information Seeking Skills Test (ISST), which is a requirement for completing Cluster One of General Education and a prerequisite for enrolling for the following fall semester. GCOM 123 is a hybrid course in the General Education curriculum that provides instruction in the fundamentals of communication as a process, with an emphasis on group work and on group public speaking skills.

Defining IL Skills for First Year Students

Professional library organizations have defined national standards for information literacy (Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, 2005). The Instruction

Coordinator at Carrier Library and Cluster One Faculty collaboratively defined specific competencies for students in first year courses. The General Education Program website states: Students are required to demonstrate the following competencies by passing the ISST:

- Identify and locate library services and collections.
- Formulate and conduct an information search that includes a variety of reference sources, such as encyclopedias, library catalogs, indexes, bibliographies, statistics sources, government publications, and resources available on the Internet.
- Evaluate information in terms of accuracy, authority, bias, and relevance.
- Employ efficient database searching techniques, such as use of Boolean operators, truncation, phrase searching, nesting, and field-specific searching.
- Identify the bibliographic elements essentials for properly citing an information source.
- Apply appropriate ethical guidelines to the use of information (The Human Community at James Madison University, 2005).

Faculty in Cluster One have also created Learning Objectives for the Communication courses. Upon completion of GCOM 123, students will be able to:

- Understand and apply the fundamentals of audience analysis, message construction, development, organization, and presentation.
- Deliver effective oral presentations in a variety of contexts
- Identify, evaluate and employ critical and sensitive listening behaviors.
- Identify and manage the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of communication in a variety of contexts.
- Recognize and apply the influences of self-concept perception and culture on communication.
- Identify, evaluate and utilize the nature and functions of power and the strategies of conflict negotiation (Cluster One: Skills for the 21st Century, 2005).

The Library Demonstration Assignment combines the Cluster One objectives with aspects of Group Presentation, including: presenting in a public place, providing onsite demonstration, and collaborative learning. The collaborative aspect of group work and cooperation in learning and peer teaching are powerful forces for achieving the general education learning objectives (Johnson and Johnson, 1991).

The Assignment Directions

The following is an abridged version of the assignment directions given to students.

Assignment objectives:

1. Research, Design and Demonstrate an Informational Presentation
2. Work in groups and document your group interaction
3. Learn to use the library, its services and materials
4. Engage in peer teaching to demonstrate the results of your research

Assignment outcomes: Students will

1. Become familiar with the library, materials, and services in order to be able in future to perform complex research projects
2. Improve their ability to work cooperatively in groups
3. Improve their ability to demonstrate and inform via a public speaking presentation
4. Gain insight by reflecting upon their actions and assess the skills and competencies of themselves and others.

Assignment details:

Step 1. Your first task is to meet in groups of 5 and use the Standard Agenda to create a plan of action.

Step 2. You must, as a group, learn everything you will need in order to teach your classmates about your assigned area of the library. You should meet with and engage the help of the reference staff and librarians.

Step 3. You must design your presentation/demonstration. You must plan how you will actually do the guided tour. You will be given 20 minutes in the class time to demonstrate to the other 25 members of class. You may introduce the presentation as a team of 5, then break into 5 separate single-person-led small groups. Design some specific examples of the particular types of search that would be relevant to your area. Design handouts or other demonstration aids.

Step 4. Create a group outline of your presentation. Do not work only as individuals, work as a team. All of you must be involved in putting together the final product. Hand in your group outline before the start of your presentation.

Step 5. Bring 5 peer feedback forms with you on the days of presentation. You will write evaluations of other groups and your evaluations will be taken into account for presentation grade.

Step 6. Keep notes in your Group Log of all your group meetings and interactions.

Step 7. After your presentation, complete two survey forms: (1) the Group Process Survey Form & (2) the Group Meeting Survey Form

There will be three grades: one for the outline, one for the presentation, and one for all feedback forms and survey sheets. Presentations will take place in the library. Your group will have 15 to 20 minutes to team-teach your assignment. Your instructor will videotape your demonstration.

Group Topics by Number

Group 1: Introduce us to the Library Services. Present all the service points, including Circulation/Reserve, Interlibrary Loan, Media Resources, and the layout of the library building itself.

Group 2: How to Find Newspaper Articles. Include examples of how to find different kinds of newspapers, such as recent, local, national, or international papers, as well as issues prior to the current year. Present how to obtain copies of articles, including those on microfilm.

Group 3: How to Find Articles from Popular Periodicals. Discuss all the options and the exact resources and processes (hint: there is more than one way!) for identifying and physically locating popular periodicals, including the microfiche holdings. Discuss the qualities and usefulness of popular periodicals as compared to scholarly journals and websites.

Group 4: How to Find Articles from Scholarly Journals. Discuss how to select the correct database for a subject area to locate scholarly journal articles. Demonstrate how to use the Library's Periodical Locator to identify local holdings. Discuss the qualities and usefulness of scholarly periodicals and the role of article abstracts.

Group 5: How to Find Books. Discuss all the options, and the exact resources and processes for identifying and physically locating books. Explain the Library of Congress classification and call number system and show us the stacks, as well as the computer search facilities.

Group 6: Present all the resources of the Reference area. This includes Editorials On File, CQ Researcher, research aids handouts, information handouts, style manuals, dictionaries, atlases, (the different kinds of sources, as well as the people!) as well as the layout and purpose of reference sources.

The Assignment in Practice

The assignment was set as the third of four presentations, and came in the 8th-11th weeks of the 16 week semester. The first week set initial group work and the second week each of the 6 groups were scheduled for a 20-30 minute meeting with the instructor, at which the 'guided tour' aspect of the presentation in the library itself still sometimes came as a surprise to some students. Some students held onto the expectation that they could each learn their own little 'speech' and they would present them like birds on a wire in the classroom. The meetings made it clear that they each had to know everything about the group's topic, and that because of the peer teaching logistics, the group would start with the introduction together, but then split into five groups of five led by one 'guide' each. This leads them to see how they must, as a group, get tutoring and information from the library staff, so that they all know all aspects of their assignment. It is at this point that the intersection between the librarians' "teachable moments" and the students' group process are emphasized. We continue this point in the final section of this paper.

This meeting also raises the issue of how one instructor can grade each individual. Once again, the overall success of the group and the library as a learning community is emphasized. It is explained that the instructor will videotape five or six minutes of one guide, and then follow

another guide and then the next and so on, as the groups pass each other at different points in their tour. This also means that while the instructor is with one group, the four other groups and guides are not being taped, and the issue of "letting go" of the ability to micro-monitor the quality and factual details of all the instruction or to evaluate all students' entire demonstrations is a compromise. We discuss this more in the final section of this paper.

The rest of the second week is devoted to research and learning. During week three, they are encouraged to complete their outline and handouts and to meet in the library and physically rehearse their presentation. Many freshmen are not previously aware of the amount of work that needs to go into preparation, not just in preparing a speech but in using library resources. The assignment was successful in helping students reduce the first year "leave-it-till-tomorrow" attitude, and their increased familiarity reduced their stage-fright. This was reflected in the feedback forms, where some students indicated they wished they had done more, sooner, for exactly those reasons. The assignment details were sent to the librarians, assistants, and students who provide service at the Circulation, Reference, Microforms, and Government Documents areas via an e-mail message. They were alerted to expect groups of students to approach them and were encouraged to greet the groups with enthusiasm as well as with descriptions of the resources and services.

Results Analysis

Students report that they feel more confident about using the library, giving public presentations, working in groups, and that this will serve them well in their college work and professional life ahead. This assignment has been given to eight sections over three semesters, approximately 210 students. The authors' interest has been in five areas: lessening speech anxiety, lessening library anxiety, improving informative/demonstration speaking skills, improving competent group work and increasing proficiency with library information skills.

Assessment methods have been qualitative: we reviewed feedback forms each student gave about three other groups, written course evaluations, and the students' individual report on group processes. This is a 5 to 10 page term paper, in which students describe their work in groups for that semester. Thus comments about the library assignment are voluntary examples given for communication issues. No one has reported negative experience in any of the five areas, with the exception of a normal range of complaints about 'social loafing' or difficulties with scheduling meeting times. Comments about the library demonstration assignment itself have always been positive, even where students grudgingly admit that they learned something new that they didn't like or that they expected to be "boring."

Discussion

Two areas of interest generated by this assignment are the interaction between library staff and students seeking advice, and peer teaching skills when demonstrating electronic searches. Students are primed to request information from library staff, especially at the reference desk. Students are reminded that librarians usually have two degrees, and should be treated with all due respect. The library staff is primed to expect students asking for what amounts to a tutorial. Many students reported positive interactions, and many library faculty and staff commented on the success of the assignment in bringing students into the library. The importance of creating a positive teaching atmosphere at service points is discussed by Westbrook and DeDecker (1993), where they state, "Ensure that staff is aware of the need for welcoming." As simple as that may seem, it is very important, and should be made explicit. If students do not receive a positive response when they approach a service point, the situation will negate the assignment objectives. A very few interactions were reported where students did not receive the service they expected. These were the exception, but they played into the stereotype and reinforced students' prejudices and library anxiety in a disproportionate way. Library staff felt more comfortable in working with student groups when they knew about the professor's expectations for the assignment. The importance of the collaborative relationship between the faculty member and the library staff is crucial for the quality of communication when students seek advice at service points.

Some specific issues have arisen lately as more instruction is given using electronic media and especially where instruction is given using electronic media about electronic media. Peer feedback forms cited presentation errors. Complaints included, "she went too fast for me," or "I lost what page we were on or how we got there." Once some people have learned a skill, they seem to forget what it was like to not know it, and they assume basic points are shared when they are not. This leads presenters to jump ahead or to type search strings too fast. Maybe they want to look super-competent for the sake of a grade. But these tendencies are often also seen in professional facilitators who use electronic displays. In GCOM123 specific "Do's and Don't's" have therefore been added to the conventional textbook skill set. Patience, sensitivity and an appreciation for the transactional nature of a demonstration are paramount.

Conclusion: Letting Go

Although the demand for instruction usually outweighs the number of staff available. Instruction librarians and faculty can be hesitant to step aside. Giving the students the authority to present information to each other felt risky, and the librarian and faculty member did observe some errors. However, the raised general level of knowledge was an acceptable trade-off for the occasional misuse of library jargon. The presenters were aware of being watched by other library users as well as their classmates, and this raised their level of confidence in public speaking. Grading was awarded at the group level rather than to individuals. The assignment achieved the greater goal of multiple library exposure and fulfilled the course objectives without requiring additional library instruction resources.

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