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STUDENT ORAL PRESENTATIONS: DEVELOPING THE SKILLS AND REDUCING THE APPREHENSION

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Abstract

For many students it is important that they develop good oral presentation skills [1] since the ability to demonstrate oral communication competence is highly valued in many professions [2] while there has also been a rise in the use of oral presentations in university classrooms [3]. Despite this, there is doubt cast over whether it is possible to support the development of the required skills and address the fear that many students experience regarding oral presentations as part of the same intervention [4]. Furthermore, despite being a widely researched topic, there is much in the area of communication apprehension that remains unclear [5]. In order to determine suitable interventions, research is required to identify pedagogy that might successfully help apprehensive presenters develop their skills and confidence [4].

This paper reports on an intervention which seeks to help students develop oral presentation skills and at the same time help apprehensive presenters reduce their fear of delivering oral presentations. The intervention, which takes place with foundation level undergraduate Accounting students, is underpinned by problem-based learning and contributing student pedagogy and focuses on the development of self-efficacy which has been identified to be a key area for the reduction of oral communication apprehension in public speaking contexts [6]. The paper will introduce the concept of communication apprehension in oral presentations and discuss causes and possible interventions. It details the progress that has been made in the study which uses qualitative data in the form of research conversations and student reflections. Such an approach is taken in order to gain insights into the "lived experiences" of students, which has been absent in much of the previous research conducted in the area [5].

Keywords: Oral presentations, oral communication apprehension, public speaking anxiety.

1 INTRODUCTION

Amongst the core competencies expected worldwide of professionals are presentation skills [1]. At the same time there has been an increased use of presentations in Higher Education (HE) [3]. Despite this, it is widely recognised that it is an area in which graduates often have not developed sufficiently [7]. This paper derives from a tension that exists between the expectations of the accountancy profession, which now requires a greater development of generic skills from graduates [8], and an enduring stereotype of the accountant in a profession that has undergone a transformation [9]. The image of the reticent professional has endured despite considerable changes experienced by the profession in the 1990s [10]. The image of accountants as "number-crunchers devoid of personality" [10] is re-enforced by the stereotype portrayed via the Internet [11]. One fear of the profession centres around the effect this stereotype has on "the development of the accounting profession" [12] with concern that the stereotype causes bias in recruitment and may become "self-fulfilling" [13].

Recruiters are also concerned about the suitability of graduates but despite communication being a main competency required in the industry [14], it is an area in which both professionals and academics are dissatisfied with the general level of graduate development [15]. Therefore, with university entrants, influenced by the stereotype of the accountant and often overestimating the relative importance of numeracy [16] and recruiters seeking graduates who can communicate, the HE sector must help undergraduates develop their communication skills so that recruiters wish to employ them.

1.1 Aims and Objectives

The study which is reported in this paper aims

to map changes in public speaking anxiety (PSA) exhibited by students during the six month period of a multifaceted intervention aimed at reducing PSA and developing oral presentation skills;

to identify factors which might be influential in determining levels of PSA amongst students during the intervention;

to ascertain which features of the intervention support the presentation skills development of those students exhibiting PSA;

to contribute to the development of a theoretical framework for the reduction of PSA and development of oral presentation skills as part of the same general intervention.

1.2 Outline

Following this introduction there is a brief discussion of the causes of PSA which is followed by consideration of suggested interventions. A framework for classroom intervention is then introduced and its practical application described.

2 AN ETIOLOGY OF PUBLIC SPEAKING ANXIETY

A feeling of nervousness when having to speak in public "is inevitable" [17]. In fact the fear of speaking to an audience is often considered the most common phobia [18, 19] with studies suggesting that three-quarters of people are fearful of public speaking [20]. Research into the fear of public speaking has been wide ranging but despite the claim that apprehension experienced in oral communication is the most widely studied communication topic [21], there is a great deal which remains unclear [5]. It therefore follows that similar difficulties to those experienced in attempting to establish an etiology of oral communication apprehension (OCA) may be encountered when attempting to establish an etiology of PSA. The difficulty that researchers have had in conceptualising OCA and PSA is not surprising since a wide range of reasons exist which attempt to explain why individuals experience such trepidation [22]. In short, PSA may derive from a variety of sources [23].

2.1 Possible Causes of Public Speaking Anxiety

Five key causes for PSA which are identified in the literature are now briefly discussed.

2.1.1 Novelty

The novelty of the experience of anticipating having to speak in front of an audience is often found to be the cause of anxiety amongst those who have no experience of delivering oral presentations [23].

2.1.2 Conspicuousness

The term 'illusion of transparency' describes the sense of conspicuousness that can be felt by presenters. A certain level of apprehension with regard to the delivery of presentations is not only normal [24] but is also desirable [25]. Furthermore, even "the calmest speakers will experience at least a few mild symptoms of anxiety" [26]. However, when presenters perceive nerves as visible to an audience then this is likely to heighten the level of apprehension felt [27].

2.1.3 Performance orientation

Presenters possess a 'cognitive orientation' on a continuum from 'performance orientation' where speakers are concerned with the "aesthetic experience for listeners" to 'communication orientation' where they are concerned with the message conveyed [28]. Performance-oriented speakers believe the skills of presenting are more "formal" and "polished" than in other communication contexts; whereas communication-oriented speakers assume the audience tolerates typical communication imperfections [28]. In many cases anxious speakers have performance orientations [26].

2.1.4 Audience characteristics

Audience characteristics can determine the level of anxiety felt by presenters. Apprehension can increase along with the size of the audience, however the reverse can sometimes be true [29]. Similar conclusions might be drawn from characteristics of audience members; some presenters prefer friends, while others prefer strangers; some prefer experts while others prefer non-experts.

2.1.5 Trait-like individual differences

Trait-like communication apprehension has become an increasingly popular explanation for OCA. Much of the discussion centres on the degree to which OCA can be regarded as genetic or as learned. Therefore one explanation is that trait-like OCA may be partially explained by heredity [30, 31]. Research by social biologists has indicated that heredity is a determinant of sociability and it follows that it may be a factor contributing to OCA [30]. Spielberger is credited with having originally proposed the notion that anxiety could be a trait [32]. He proposed that anxiety research should focus on the existence of a "personality trait that remains relatively stable over time" [33]. Building on the notion of trait-like anxiety, the communibiological paradigm has been proposed which suggests that as much as eighty percent of trait-like communication apprehension may be accounted for by genetics [34]. Until the communibiological paradigm was suggested, trait–like communication apprehension had been mostly viewed as "a product of social learning" [35]. This discussion extends to PSA which is suggested as being "validly conceptualized as a trait" [36]. Despite this, most evidence suggests that OCA caused as a result of the oral communication taking place in a public speaking context is greater than OCA in other contexts. Research from fifteen studies conducted with business students from the US, Australia, Ireland, Spain, Canada and the UK found that in thirteen of the fifteen cases OCA for the public speaking context was reported as higher than the other contexts [37]. These findings are not limited to business students with similar findings for research conducted with, for example, American engineering students [38], school principals [39] and teachers [40], and Japanese psychology students [41]. This suggests that while trait-like anxiety may be viewed as the main contributor to PSA, anxiety caused in this context has more situational factors than in other contexts.

3 CLASSROOM RESPONSES

Given the variety of possible causes of PSA that exist it is not surprising that a variety of responses have been suggested and that the results reported are mixed [36].

3.1 Possible interventions

Interventions are often categorised as behavioural and pedagogic [4, 43]. Behavioural interventions, often provided in addition to presentation activities, generally focus on the psychology of the individual towards presentations "and include systematic desensitisation, cognitive restructuring, assertiveness training, stress release exercises and visualisation techniques" [31]. However, a difficulty with many of the behavioural interventions is that they are "time consuming and … therefore inappropriate for 'mass' education" [4]. Pedagogical interventions tend to focus on the activity [31] with the main examples "skills training and actual public speaking" [43]. This type of approach incorporates suitable interventions by "involving students in communication development exercises" [4]. However, pedagogical interventions need to be designed to ensure anxious students engage in them and that apprehension is not heightened [4]. Despite this warning, there is evidence that the use of presentation practice can reduce apprehension and increase the inclination to be involved in such activities [44, 29]. This brief discussion of interventions aimed at reducing PSA illustrates the variety of choices faced by course designers.

When considering how to reduce PSA, there is broad support for the introduction of a variety of methods. Indeed it has been suggested that "the widest possible combination of methods" should be used [45], while "the best treatment for OCA appears to be a combination of behavioural and pedagogical interventions delivered in a supportive and positive atmosphere" [43]. Despite this conclusion, frameworks for the development of oral presentation skills are not easy to find [7, 46]. This means that the call by Docan-Morgan and Schmidt "for teachers and course designers to develop and test innovative techniques and activities that can help learners reduce their public speaking anxiety" needs to be heeded [42]. However, while the benefits associated with interventions are widely reported, little research has addressed how or why improvements in PSA occur when they do [47].

3.2 A Framework for Intervention

Given that there seems to be broad support for interventions which draw on multiple methods, an intervention has been developed which seems to have met with some success in attempting to help a diverse cohort of students who range from experienced presenters to those who have never presented and those who are highly anxious about the thought of presenting to those who are confident.

3.2.1 Illeris's three dimensional model

The approach taken is broadly underpinned by the three dimensional model of learning developed by Illeris [48]. The model is used since it allows for different theories of learning to be incorporated into the same model and accounts for conditions that influence learning as well as those that are influenced by learning [48]. Fig. 1 shows Illeris's diagrammatic representation of this process.
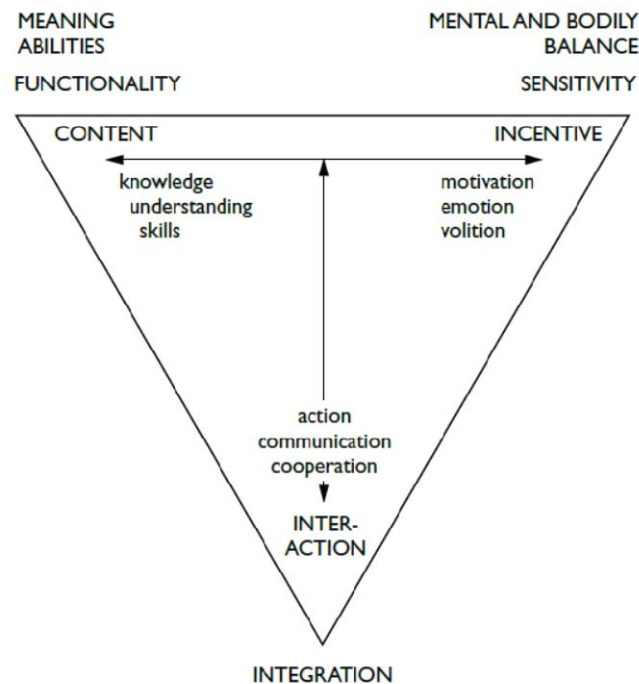

Figure 1 The three dimensions of learning and competence development [48].

Illeris's model not only accounts for internal and external dimensions of learning but also recognises that internal learning has two dimensions, namely content (cognitive learning) and incentive (emotional learning) [48]. Illeris claims to have been the first to treat emotional learning as equal in status to cognitive learning [49]. The importance of the incentive dimension is highlighted by Miller and Boud who argue that "[e]motions and feelings are key pointers both to possibilities for, and barriers to, learning" [50]. Indeed, learning from a student perspective may be determined more by emotion than cognition [51]. However, this element of learning is relatively unexplored when compared with the content dimension of learning [52]. Since the current study is concerned with the development of oral presentation skills and how apprehension can be reduced, knowledge of the incentive dimension is important in the development of the approach. If learning opportunities do not account for the incentive dimension then for those students who do not have sufficient drive there is no real learning opportunity due to the barrier presented by this dimension. As a result, an understanding, particularly of emotions in learning and motivations to learn, can help ensure presentation exercises are more inclusive than if this were left to chance.

There might be many reasons why students may not have the motivation to learn and part of the difficulty in addressing this area has been the "bewildering complexity of ideas and findings" in the area of motivation to learn [53]. Despite the range of possible theories, a subset relate directly to the individual's expectations of success. These theories are often collectively termed expectancy-value theories [53] of which one, self-efficacy, has already been identified as having a close relation to OCA and particularly the public speaking element [6]. It is therefore an important part of the current framework, despite Illeris not mentioning self-efficacy in his model. If barriers to learning that exist in the form of OCA and specifically PSA can be lowered as a result of the approach taken, which is directly informed by self-efficacy, then this allows the potential for learning to take place where previously there would have been no learning.

3.2.2 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura as "the beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" [54]. Beliefs that individuals hold about self-efficacy are concerned with competencies [55], meaning that it applies to oral communication. In addition, the beliefs that individuals hold about their self-efficacy are not generalisations but apply to specific situations [55]. This implies that individual self-efficacy may be specific to particular oral communication contexts. In fact it has been suggested that there may be a strong negative correlation between self-efficacy and OCA [6, 56] with apprehension for delivering presentations the main driver of this relationship [6]. Furthermore, recently developed frameworks for presentation skills development are based on self-efficacy [7, 46]. In Bandura's analysis the expectations that individuals hold concerning self-efficacy are constructed from four sources: performance accomplishments or mastery experiences, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states [58].

Elaborating on Bandura's ideas, Mitchell describes how self-efficacy can be developed through these four sources [59]. He first mentions "mastery experiences" which derive from past experience, meaning that self-efficacy can be developed through practice [58]. These experiences, if positive, are likely to develop self-efficacy; however, if the experience is negative then self-efficacy is likely to diminish [55]. Mitchell also mentions "vicarious experiences" in which self-efficacy can be gained by observing others [58]. This helps individuals form expectations about how they might behave [55]. The third aspect, "verbal persuasion" which is "the validation of one's own efforts by significant others", places value on feedback [58]. The final aspect contributing to self-efficacy is "emotional and physiological arousal" which Mitchell explains as "noting one's state of anxiety or enthusiasm" [58]. This is something that students may not wish to consider but might be encouraged to through the use of reflection. Mitchell sees the development of self-efficacy as central to student engagement [58].

The importance of considering self-efficacy as part of programme design for oral presentation competence is emphasised by the development of the "Seven Design Principles for Developing Oral Presentation Competence" [7]. The principles emphasise the importance of self-efficacy development as key to the development of oral presentation competence with self-efficacy mentioned in four of the seven principles. However, as previously mentioned, Illeris does not include self-efficacy in his considerations despite much of his writing seeming to point towards self-efficacy as potentially having a strong role in the incentive dimension. Given the suggested relation between self-efficacy and OCA, it would seem that it may be a key element of the incentive dimension, particularly when considering the question of what approach might be taken to reduce PSA and develop presentation skills in the same intervention. Illeris identifies motivation as being important in learning but he discusses this in relation to the transformative learning of Mezirow and emphasises the potential barriers that learners may exhibit when encountering such learning [59]. It would seem that low self-efficacy might fall into this category for some and therefore provides another reason for incorporating it into the framework of the current study. Furthermore, there is support for the development of interventions that focus on the raising of self-efficacy and the development of communication skills [6].

3.2.2 Other learning theories

Given that the intervention, underpinned by Illeris's framework, occurs amongst a large group of students who have varying experiences and expectations, various learning theories might simultaneously help explain how students both develop skills and confidence in presenting. The nurturing of self-efficacy is key but problem based learning [60], contributing student pedagogy [61] and experiential learning [62] all contribute to this approach.

3.2.3 Classroom practice

The approach adopted in the current study recognises that individual students bring with them a wide range of experiences and conceptions of presenting. Therefore in any given activity it is possible for a variety of learning to occur. With this in mind, the discussion that follows focuses on how theory and pedagogy underpin the activities with the aim of providing the widest opportunities for learning.

During the year students prepare three projects which culminate in presentations delivered to an audience of peers and tutors. The projects are intended to simulate those that might occur in the real world, being underpinned by problem-based learning. As part of the preparation process the students are encouraged to practice the presentations either on their own, with peers or with an Academic Skills Tutor. By working in groups to prepare and practice the students may improve self-efficacy since this can be improved through the honing of the presentation, the experience of delivering the presentation successfully and also through having to communicate with each other in groups.

The parameters of the presentations that the students deliver are constructed so that the three presentations become progressively more challenging. This adheres to the "Seven Design Principles for Developing Oral Presentation Competence" [7] and is also an approach which Turk promotes. Since adrenalin is produced in response to the anticipated situation, when the body realises that there is actually nothing to fear the reaction is subsequently reduced [63]. The "process of learned response is quite involuntary, and cannot be changed once learnt" [63]. This approach therefore also supports the development of self-efficacy. The experience of the first presentation is designed to be as non-threatening as possible; short in duration; open-ended with no right or wrong answer; no questioning from the audience and having feedback focussed on what the presenter has done well. This is designed to ensure as far as possible that students see their presentation as a success and so can take the experience into account as they move on to the next project.

The presentations are delivered to both tutors and peers which means that during presentation weeks the students observe four peer presentations. This adheres to the principle of "Behavioural modelling" [7]. As part of the observation the students provide feedback using grading criteria and anonymous comments. This aspect of the activities is underpinned by Contributing Student Pedagogy [64] and also complies with the "Seven Design Principles for Developing Oral Presentation Competence" [7]. Furthermore, this aspect of the projects also supports the development of self-efficacy through vicarious experience of observation and verbal persuasion, albeit in written form, of the feedback received.

For each presentation the students complete a structured reflection using all the evidence available. This allows them to think about the event and focus on how they might improve for the next project. This aspect of the activities is supported by experiential learning but is also relevant to the development of self-efficacy since emotional arousal may be activated as the students write about how they felt and also think of the causes for particular outcomes.

Finally, as part of the course preparation, students complete a series of self-assessments which include questions about presentations. Students indicating high PSA are invited for a one-to-one appointment aimed at identifying the main sources of PSA and considering how they might reduce it. This approach is also underpinned by self-efficacy. In most cases the students are reminded of the sources of self-efficacy and a discussion takes place which centres on verbal persuasion and emotional arousal. This discussion is based on many of the areas typically reported as sources of PSA and considers possible solutions. One example drawing on verbal persuasion concerns perceptions that individuals have of speaking to audiences, particularly focussing on the performance-communication continuum [26]. If students with OCA for public speaking demonstrate that they have a performance orientation then the discussion focusses on encouraging them to think of the presentation as a communication event [26]. Such discussion not only has the potential to reduce PSA, but it may also improve the quality of the presentations students deliver. The discussion has the potential to completely change the way that individuals think about presentations. It is therefore underpinned by constructivism; some students will not have developed many ideas about what constitutes a good presentation and therefore are likely to adopt the ideas without resistance; assimilating the new knowledge. On the other hand, students with prior experiences which have resulted in a performance orientation are likely to need more persuasion in order to adopt the notion of presentations as communication events. In such cases, needing to change beliefs concerning presentations, the students will at least be experiencing accommodation. This reiterates the view that student learning is likely to be underpinned by various theories and so supports the adoption of Illeris's framework.

Discussion in the one-to-one sessions may also consider emotional arousal by, for example, discussing how students feel before presentations, how they can attempt to overcome any negative feelings and how they might attempt to manage nerves as they prepare to present.

Much of the discussion focusses on aspects of the approach taken in the module which take place through group projects or through student interactions during projects. The problem-based and contributing student approaches need to be supplemented by one-to-one meetings, particularly with those exhibiting the greatest PSA. This then caters for the varying needs of the students and supports the use of Illeris's model as a framework. The model supports the likely complexity of learning which takes place as well as the notion that an approach which both develops presentation skills and helps reduce PSA is achievable.

4   DATA COLLECTION

Much of the previous research in the area of OCA has "been solely quantitative in orientation" [5]. As a result, a deeper understanding of the experiences of students, of the causes of their apprehension, their feelings when preparing for and delivering presentations and what they feel about classroom approaches is rare. In fact, identifying research which has addressed this area has proven difficult; "no prior research with business and accounting students has explored the phenomenon of OCA using qualitative methods. Indeed, there is an absence of qualitative research of the topic with students in all disciplines." [5]. Therefore, the current study uses qualitative insights gained from student participants in order to find out about their "lived experiences" and tries to establish which aspects of the approach help students with their presentations as well as attempting to ascertain how and why they help. In order to do this the study uses student reflections on the presentation activities as well as research conversations, also known as 'muddy interviews' [65]. By using the student reflections a greater number of participants can be included in the data collection than if interviews were used. The one-to-one tutorials with students who indicate that they might have PSA are also research conversations where the students agree to participate in the research study.

5   CONCLUSION

The paper has detailed progress that has been made to date in the study by setting out the framework for a classroom intervention to support the development of presentation skills which accounts for those who are apprehensive about the prospect of speaking to audiences. It shows that there is a need for research into approaches which demonstrate some success and draws on recent research to emphasise the potential that self-efficacy has in the development of interventions.

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