

**Can They Communicate? Influence of Communication Courses on College Students'
Perceived Ability to Communicate**

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Introduction/Need for Research

One aspect of preparing a proficient and professional scientific workforce, priority three of the American Association for Agricultural Education's national research agenda (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016), is preparing students with the communication skills they need to communicate with a global audience about complex scientific issues. In an effort to prepare a scientific and professional workforce that has the ability to communicate (Conley & French, 2014), many higher education institutions are reshaping curricula and incorporating holistic classroom approaches to build students' confidence in their soft skills, including communication skills (Russell, 2007). Our university was on the forefront of reshaping curricula in 2014 when the administrators adopted the plan to integrate communication-/writing-intensive courses across disciplines to improve students' communication skills.

Theoretical Framework

Bandura (1989), in his social cognitive theory, notes that human behavior is based on views of personal realities and environments, which we used as the theory to guide our study of students' perceptions of their ability to communicate. Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, and Fielitz' (2011) framework on communication skill characteristics was also an instrumental part of our study. They described communication as 1) listening effectively; 2) communicating accurately and concisely; 3) communicating orally; 4) communicating pleasantly and professionally; 5) communicating in writing; 6) asking effective questions; and 7) communicating appropriately and professionally using social media, which guided the students in describing their communication abilities.

The purpose of the study was to describe students' perceptions of their communication skills before and after completing communication-/writing-intensive courses in the agricultural and life sciences at Texas A&M University. The following objectives guided this study:

- RO1: Describe students' retrospective perceptions of their communication skills prior to and after completing a communication-/writing-intensive course.
- RO2: Describe how students' perceptions of their communication skills change based on completing at least one communication-/writing-intensive course.

Method

We conducted the study using survey methodology (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2011) and collected retrospective data from a convenience sample of students who attended the Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences career fairs in spring 2017 and fall 2017 ($N = 900$). One limitation to collecting retrospective data is responses could be prone to recall and selection bias; however, retrospective data collection is beneficial for helping establish causal relationships that help build hypotheses for grounding future studies (Nickson, 2017). Because students attending career fairs may be more focused on career readiness, the retrospective approach helped us understand students' perceived ability to communicate (Kane, 2015).

We had 315 voluntary respondents, yielding a 35% response rate. Our questionnaire included a five-point, Likert-type scale (1=low ability; 2=mid-low ability; 3=average ability; 4=mid-high ability; and 5=high ability) designed to retrospectively assess respondents' perceptions of their communication skill characteristics based on Crawford et al.'s (2011) study. Twenty-one percent ($f = 65$) of respondents were 21 years old; 60% ($f = 188$) were female; 34%

($f = 107$) were college seniors; and 24% ($f = 77$) were agricultural economics majors. Fifty-seven percent ($f = 180$) had completed or were currently enrolled in a communication-/writing-intensive course.

Results

Respondents noted they were most proficient in listening effectively before ($M = 3.93$; $SD = .881$) and after ($M = 4.36$; $SD = .762$) completing a communication-/writing-intensive course and least proficient in asking effective questions before ($M = 3.14$; $SD = .990$) and after ($M = 4.12$; $SD = .821$) completing a communication-/writing-intensive course. Respondents' perceived they improved the most in their ability to listen effectively before ($M = 3.93$; $SD = .881$) and after ($M = 4.36$; $SD = .762$) completing a communication-/writing-intensive course.

Each of the seven communication skill characteristics were significant before and after completing communication-/writing-intensive courses. We found significant differences ($t(315) = -17.634$, $p < .001$, $r = .62$) between respondents' overall communication skills score (an average of the seven communication skills) before and after completing a communication-/writing-intensive course. However, we found no significant differences in the respondents' who had completed at least one communication-/writing-intensive course and those who had not.

Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

Respondents perceived they had a mid- to high-ability to listen effectively and had an average- to mid-ability to ask questions before completing a communication-/writing-intensive course and a mid-high- to high-ability to listen effectively and ask questions after completing a communication-/writing-intensive course. Although both mean scores increased between their retrospective before- and after-perceptions, does students' confidence in their ability to communicate match their actual competence? Because Bandura (1989) suggested cognition builds on reflection, we recommend investigating reflection and its impact on students' attained skill level in a communication-/writing-intensive course. Kane (2015) argued self-reflection is a crucial element to improve communication ability, and such a study could lead to a better understanding of strategies to teach each specific communication skill characteristics.

Students' perceived communication skill levels before and after completing a communication-/writing-intensive course aligned with the national Crawford et al. (2011) study. Employers in the Crawford et al. (2011) study ranked listening effectively as most important for new employees, and students ranked listening effectively as the characteristic with the most improvement. Conley and French (2014) argued that students who value similar priorities as employers are more career-ready. Subsequently, we recommend interviewing employers to compare their perceptions of entry-level employees' communication skill characteristics to their expectations of those communication skills in the workforce.

Last, respondents' overall communication scores were not significant. Perhaps, it was because the current structure of the communication-/writing-intensive courses is not effective or the current curricula is not designed as to improve students' communication skills. Stripling and Ricketts (2016) claimed identifying effective teaching strategies within each discipline could strengthen a multidisciplinary workforce. Therefore, we suggest agricultural communications educators work with faculty across colleges of agriculture to help them design and deliver communications curricula that is effective and efficient for both faculty and students. By educating students across colleges of agriculture on how to be effective communicators, we are not only enhancing the science of agriculture but also developing advocates who can communicate their message.

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