

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



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Introduction and Background

- 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 to communicate with a global audience about complex scientific issues.
- Necessary to understand student's self-perceptions of their ability to communicate (Conley & French, 2014; Kane, 2015).
- Many higher education institutions are reshaping curricula and incorporating holistic classroom approaches to build students' confidence in their communication skills (Russell, 2007).
- In 2014, Texas A&M University reshaped its core curricula to integrate communication-/writing-intensive courses across disciplines to improve students' communication skills.

Theoretical Framework

- Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989).
- Soft skills and communication skills in agriculture (Crawford et al., 2011).

Purpose

- Describe students' perceptions of their communication skills before and after completing communication-/writing-intensive courses in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University.

Objectives

1. Describe students' retrospective perceptions of their communication skills before and after completing a communication-/writing-intensive course.
2. Describe how students' perceptions of their communication skills change based on completing at least one communication-/writing-intensive course.

Methods

- Survey design (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2011).
- Convenience sample ($n = 315$) with a 35% response rate:
 - Students who attended the Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences career fairs in spring 2017 and fall 2017 ($N = 900$).
- Five-point, Likert-type scale (1=*low ability*; 2=*mid-low ability*; 3=*average ability*; 4=*mid-high ability*; and 5=*high ability*) to retrospectively assess students' perceptions of communication skills.
- Retrospective data can be prone to recall and selection bias (Nickson, 2017); however, the retrospective approach helped investigate students' perceived ability to communicate in a career-focused environment (Kane, 2015).
- Twenty-one percent ($f = 65$) 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 completing a communication-/writing-intensive course.

Findings

- **Most proficient skill:** *Listening effectively* before ($M = 3.93$; $SD = .881$) and after ($M = 4.36$; $SD = .762$) the courses.
- **Least proficient skill:** *Asking effective questions* before ($M = 3.14$; $SD = .990$) and after ($M = 4.12$; $SD = .821$) the courses.
- *Each of the seven communication skill characteristics* were statistically significant before and after the courses.
- *Overall communication skill score* (an average of the seven communication skills) was statistically significant ($t(315) = -17.634$, $p < .001$, $r = .62$) before and after the courses.
- No significant differences between respondents' who *had completed* at least one course and those who *had not*.

Conclusions

- *Listening effectively*, most proficient skill.
- *Asking effective questions*, least proficient skill.
- *Listening effectively*, most improvement.
- *Perceived communication skill levels improved* before and after the communication courses, aligning with Crawford et al.'s (2011) study.
- Current structure of the communication courses might not be effective.

Recommendations

- Investigate reflection and its impact on students' attained skill level.
- Interview employers to compare their perceptions of entry-level employees' communication skill characteristics to their expectations in the workforce.
- Communications faculty work with faculty across colleges of agriculture to help design and deliver communications curricula.
- Educate students across colleges of agriculture to be effective communicators who can advocate for their message within a multidisciplinary workforce.

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Communication Skill Characteristics (Crawford et al., 2011)

Listening Effectively

Communicating Accurately and Concisely

Communicating Pleasantly and Professionally

Communicating Orally

Communicating in Writing

Asking Effective Questions

Using Social Media Appropriately and Professionally

