

Exploring Student Perceptions of an Asynchronous Oral Communication Course

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Introduction/Need for Study

Online courses provide students with flexible learning opportunities, and the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the number of undergraduate students taking at least one course online (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). Additionally, the emergence of online degree programs has led the communication discipline and instructors to experiment with teaching performance-based courses such as oral communication online (Dendy, 2020; Ward, 2016). However, there is limited research regarding teaching oral communications online and associated student learning outcomes. Having a greater understanding of the effects of such courses would benefit higher education, specifically undergraduate students, and their employers (Dendy, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of the study was to describe undergraduate students' perceptions of an asynchronous oral communication course in a college of agriculture in hopes of gaining an increased understanding of how the educational experience can be improved and inform future asynchronous teaching practices. Additionally, this study was not designed to be generalized to broader populations, but rather to understand student experiences based on the context in which they occurred. The following research question guided the study: How do students who have completed an asynchronous oral communication course perceive the course and their oral communication skill development?

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The theoretical perspective that encompassed this study was constructivism. Constructivism supports the idea that multiple truths exist based on individual experiences with a phenomenon, meaning that individual experiences produce different meanings (Crotty, 1998). According to Crotty (1998), an individual becomes a knower of truth as they interpret the world. In the context of this study, the students have constructed knowledge pertaining to the asynchronous oral communication course based on their experiences and knowledge.

Methodology

This qualitative study purposively recruited undergraduate students enrolled in a sophomore level asynchronous oral communication course in a college of agriculture at the University of Tennessee. All students ($n = 48$) enrolled in the course received four invitations to participate in individual, semi-structured interviews through the Canvas course management system and their university email. Invitations stopped after data saturation, and 16 individual interviews were conducted. Each interview session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 21, and 12 identified as female and four as male. Varying levels of online course experience was found among participants as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To establish trustworthiness, interviews were audio-recorded through Zoom, and Zoom's automatic transcriptions were exported to Microsoft Word. Then, transcripts were listened to, and corrections were made to the transcriptions if necessary. Once the transcriptions were completed, recordings were listened to a second time to verify accuracy (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, member checks were completed to increase credibility, and audit trails were created to ensure dependability (Dooley, 2007). Data were analyzed using domain analysis, which is a type of thematic analysis that seeks to discover and organize parts or elements of cultural meaning (Spradley, 1980). Spradley (1980) identified these elements of cultural meaning as domains and indicated that each domain consists of relationships between included terms

(data provided by the participants) and cover terms (created by the researcher). Domain analysis is accomplished by reading the transcript and searching for included terms of interest. Once included terms were identified, they are grouped with related included terms and subsequently given a cover term which described and identified each group. Transcripts were analyzed separately, but analyses were combined to give final findings, thereby including a method of researcher triangulation in the data analysis (Dooley, 2007).

Results/Findings

Data analysis led to the following four domains: (a) decision to enroll, (b) quality indicators, (c) learning outcomes, and (d) limitations. Participants described two factors that led to enrollment in the course – the course is a university requirement and content was delivered asynchronously. Students enrolled because an oral communication course fulfilled a graduation requirement and perceived asynchronous courses allowed them to complete course requirements on their own time around other courses, work schedules, and social activities. Regarding the domain of quality indicators, participants perceived quality to be influenced by course navigation, course technology, course material, and instructional variety. Participants perceived the repetitive nature of Canvas modules as contributing to the ease of course navigation; technology tools such as Nearpod and Panopto promoted learner engagement; course material being relevant to course objectives and real-world application; and varying instructional strategies (e.g., speech modeling, speech outline discussions, speech critics, and individual and group speeches) aided skill building. Participants also believed the course resulted in three overall learning outcomes – planning, technology, and public speaking skills. They felt more proficient in planning for and structuring speeches; utilizing technology for speaking in digital contexts; and minimizing filler words, maintaining eye contact, and becoming a more confident speaker. Limitations were no live audience to gauge peer perceptions of their speeches and not receiving immediate feedback, which impacted teacher and student immediacy.

Conclusions

Participants' perceptions of an asynchronous oral communication course and their skill development were shaped by four domains: (a) decision to enroll, (b) quality indicators, (c) learning outcomes, and (d) limitations. Overall, participants were satisfied with their learning experience and believe their oral communication skills improved, and the skills gained will be beneficial in-person and in digital contexts. Participants perceived identified limitations as minimal with real-world applications and skill development outweighing asynchronous constraints. Participants' perceptions are supported by Ward (2016) and Dendy (2020).

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Based on this study, the importance of oral communication and the increasing need to effectively communicate in digital contexts, colleges of agriculture should consider if there is a need to offer an oral communication course specific to digital contexts. Future research should determine curricular needs related to digital contexts and continue to investigate the efficacy of asynchronous oral communication courses seeking to replicate an in-person oral communication course. For this course, we recommend students are allowed to post select course assignments to tools such as discussion boards or Panopto to allow for peer feedback. We also recommend virtual office hours or establishing a course GroupMe, which can increase student-to-student and teacher-student interactions to improve student and teacher immediacy (Estepp et al., 2013).

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