An Exploratory Study of Students' Oral Presentation Self-Efficacy

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Introduction

A major goal of undergraduate educators should be to produce graduates with communication skills sufficient for success in the workplace (Zinn, Faustman, & Riesen, 1993). For example, enhancing communication skills will contribute to a student's ability to work together, to speak to diverse audiences, and to communicate their knowledge and expertise more widely to a variety of audiences (NRC, 2009). In a recent presentation to the American Agricultural Economics Association, Boteler (2006) noted that communication skills were two of the top three rated skill sets that agribusiness employers sought in new college graduates. This finding is important considering that the inability to communicate effectively is a significant disadvantage for agricultural graduates (National Council for Agricultural Education, 2009).

In recent years, calls have been made for graduates to be proficient in oral communication skills so that they can function effectively the workplace (Crosling & Ward, 2002). Oral communication covers a wide area, ranging from formal presentations to participating in teams and meetings. Because the development of oral presentation skills has received little research attention (De Grez, Valcke, & Roozen, 2009; Brown & Morrisey, 2004; Alshare & Hindi, 2004; Campbell, Mothersbaugh, Brammer, & Taylor, 2001), we sought to explore undergraduate students' level of oral presentation self-efficacy using a measure based on the principles of Bandura's social cognitive theory.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). Social cognitive theory has been noted to be very well suited to explain the development of complex behavior such as oral presentation skills (Grez, Valcke, & Roozen, 2009). In particular, we were interested in self-efficacy, one of the core constructs of Bandura's theory. Self-efficacy is defined as, "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Self-efficacy beliefs are constructed from four principal sources of information: mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal (Bandura, 1997). Numerous studies have found that as self-efficacy, or a person's confidence in his/her ability to perform a task increase, performance measured after training also increases (Bandura, 1986; Brown & Morrisey, 2004). In fact, several researchers have noted the importance of confidence in giving successful oral presentations (e.g., Tucker & McCarthy, 2001; Crosling & Ward, 2004; De Grez, Valcke, & Roozen, 2006; Adams, 2004; Brown & Morrisey, 2004; Huiberts & Leeds, 2009).

Methods

Participants

Sixty-nine percent of students were male and 31% were female. Students' age ranged from 19 to 24 (M= 21.0, SD = .47). Forty-five percent of students were seniors, 49% were juniors, 4% were sophomores, and 2% were freshmen.

The research design of the study was a one-group pretest-posttest design. The dependent variable was oral presentation self-efficacy score. The intervention involved instructor/researcher's use of the four principal sources of self-efficacy information. Participants

for this study were undergraduate students enrolled in an oral communications course in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at a Midwestern university (n = 75). The measure used to collect data was the Presentation Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES; Authors, 2007). The PSES is comprised of 15 items which measure the level of confidence students have in their ability to complete oral presentation-related tasks. The PSES items are rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*no confidence at all*) to 6 (*complete confidence*) with higher scores indicating greater levels of confidence. Internal consistency for the measures was assessed during a pilot test resulting in an alpha reliability of .92. Descriptive statistics used included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Paired t-tests were used to describe differences between pretest and posttest scores on the PSES.

Findings

Fifty-two percent of students had no previous course or courses that required a large number of presentations while 60% had no previous work-related experiences that required giving a large number of presentations (e.g. workshops, seminars, or meetings). Results of the paired t-tests showed significant differences in mean pretest and posttest oral presentation self-efficacy scores (Pretest mean = 4.30, SD=.80, Posttest mean =5.10, SD =.57, t=-8.436, p<.001).

Conclusions and Implications

Despite the limitations related to the research design of the study, findings indicate that the use of an intervention involving the use of the four principal sources of self-efficacy information enhanced the oral presentation self-efficacy of undergraduate students. It should be noted that the current version of the PSES did not specifically measure the four sources of self-efficacy, hence a logical next step will be to develop a revised version of the PSES that include items measuring mastery experiences, vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. One of the major implications resulting from this study is the potential benefit to instructors seeking to enhance the oral communication skills of their students.

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