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Communication Apprehension and Teaching Assistants

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Abstract

The authors of this note have developed a program aimed at training, providing feedback to, and evaluating the performance of graduate teaching assistants. It includes the use of a tool called the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, which is reliable and valid.

Our group has developed programs aimed at training, providing feedback to, and evaluating the performance of graduate teaching assistants. We have always been on the lookout for methods to deal with problems which arise in TA programs. One potential problem is *communication apprehension* [1], anxiety experienced by an individual prior to or during the act of (oral) communication. We have known a few TAs for whom communication apprehension was debilitating and caused them to resign after relatively few classroom encounters. To a degree, communication apprehension is both measurable and remediable. For these reasons, we undertook a systematic study of communication apprehension among a group of 33 TAs.

McCroskey has developed an objective twenty-five-item pencil-and-paper instrument called the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA), which is reliable and valid [2]. (In our study, the reliability of the PRCA was 0.92.) Studies have related communication apprehension to: occupational choice and desirability [3], selection of seats within groups [4], selection of class sizes [5], and other variables. In each case, those high in communication apprehension opt for situations least likely to require oral communication.

In an earlier report on the use of a teaching coach [6], we described a technique developed by Flanders [7] called interaction analysis in which verbal statements of students and teachers in the classroom are recorded in a matrix format. (This technique is described in

detail in Module VIII of Project TEACH [8].) As we reported, the matrices from the teaching coach are kept for research purposes.

Using the Statistical Analysis System [9], we attempted to discover a relationship between PRCA scores and a wide variety of TA classroom verbal interactions and performances including: lesson quality, percent time spent with TA talking, percent time in silence, percent time spent with student talking, and the ratio of indirect to direct teaching. In no case was there found a significant difference between PRCA scores and any among the other variables studied.

Managers of TA programs should be aware that communication apprehension can be cause for extreme problems for some TAs. When this problem is suspect, the PRCA may be employed as a diagnostic tool [10]. Very high PRCA scores indicate that the TA may benefit from a treatment program utilizing systematic desensitization procedures [11]. Systematic desensitization, a widely used method of treatment, is administered in six one-hour sessions. It leads to reduced apprehension through the use of counter-conditioning based on role simulation and simple relaxation techniques. Our studies indicate that TA program managers should not be overly concerned with communication apprehension under normal conditions. Early diagnosis and treatment of high apprehension, however, may help those rare new graduate students who resign teaching assignments to cope with the "threat" of communication.

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