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ABSTRACT

Self-empowerment techniques are personal growth activities that are used over time to create a sense of self-worth, personal accountability, and power in an individual. Generally, the goal of these techniques is to recognize, accept, and act upon individual hidden reserves of talent, ability, and courage. The techniques are learned experientially (through direct experience) and are best presented in combination or groups of activities. The climate in the self-empowerment classroom is warm, friendly, active and supportive. The students tend to see themselves as family, helping each other work on confidence and personal growth. In a pilot study, two primary beliefs led to the introduction of self-empowerment techniques in seven college classes: (1) that students value speech education that uses self-empowerment techniques; and (2) that students' confidence and competence improves as their self-concept improves. Subjects were 180 students at the University of Alaska in Anchorage. During the public speaking phase, peer, teacher, and self-evaluations were performed. Three formal tests were also administered, including ongoing honesty statements in which students state frankly how they feel about their state of mind and their work. The day-to-day format includes a mixture of extemporaneous and impromptu speeches, notes, lectures, experiential individual and group activities, discussions and PIG pages (Purpose, Intended Results and Groundrules for the class). Student and administrative evaluations of the pilot project were positive. (Contains 21 references.) (TB)

Self-empowerment Techniques: A New Direction for Teachers of College Public Speaking Courses

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Running head: SELF-EMPOWERMENT TECHNIQUES

Abstract

In this pilot study, self-empowerment techniques were used with 180 students in seven public speaking classes at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, during a two-year period. Students reporting their responses to these experiential activities were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the value and usefulness of these techniques in their daily lives. As educators, our concern is with this type of crossover learning, and results such as these are significant.

Theoretical grounding from the Human Potential Movement and the "Self-empowerment" Movement is explicated, and the value of this new direction for teachers of college public speaking courses is discussed.

Self-empowerment Techniques: A New Direction for Teachers of College Public Speaking Courses

Most college public speaking classes are filled with students who are afraid, at least initially, to give speeches. Of all the public settings, this one in particular seems to be the most frightening. In fact, besides fulfilling a college requirement, overcoming anxiety is one of the main reasons people take speech (Weaver, 1983). Often heard in these classrooms are comments like this: "I really need this class," "I'm scared to death of speeches," and "I've been putting this off as long as I can." Usually, what students lack is confidence and competence. The purpose of this paper, then, is to introduce some very successful self-empowerment techniques that can assist students to achieve both of these goals.

Based on the positive and unusual results observed during and after teaching with self-empowerment techniques, these techniques appear to be the key to unlocking student creativity, energy, and spontaneity. In addition, they hold great potential for helping students face and conquer their fears of public speaking.

Self-empowerment techniques are personal growth activities that are used over time to create a sense of self-worth, personal accountability, and power in an individual. Generally, the goal of these techniques is to recognize, accept, and act upon individual

hidden reserves of talent, ability and courage. These techniques are learned experientially (through direct experience), and are best presented in combinations or groups of activities.

The setting for the use of self-empowerment techniques is very different from a traditional classroom in climate and atmosphere. The "climate" in such a classroom tends to be warm, friendly, active, and supportive. It is not at all unusual for students to seek each other out before class and share either accounts of experiences or new successes. The students tend to see themselves as a "family," helping each other work on confidence and personal growth. Humor and an overall feeling of goodwill seem to be ever-present. It is an enjoyable experience.

In addition, there is usually an atmosphere of drama, excitement, anticipation. Students are encouraged to participate fully, and they expect others to do the same. It is common to see students in costume, bringing music and colorful visuals to class for their speeches. As a group, they learn to expect only one thing: that their speeches will be given when planned. Many report they look forward to coming to class because it is so unusual each day.

Finally, lectures are used to present only the essential content from the text and frequently serve to clarify or illustrate concepts. They are not used as often as the experiential activities.

In this pilot study, two primary beliefs led to the introduction of self-empowerment techniques in the seven college classes under examination. They were:

H1: Students will value speech education that uses self-empowerment techniques presented experientially.

H2: As students' self-concepts improve, their confidence and competence levels will also improve.

These two guiding beliefs were founded on both a basic understanding of human nature and on common sense. The self-empowerment techniques were derived from a variety of sources; most notably the Human Potential Movement and what will be called the Self-empowerment Movement.

Theoretical Framework

Definitions

Fear is defined by Insight Seminars and by Semigran (1988) as "Fantasized Expectations Appearing Real" (p. 26). This concept, when expanded to explore the idea of fear as fantasy (a product of our own thought) allows students to understand the cause and treatment of their public speaking fears. As Gebser (1949/1984) so aptly points out, "Anxiety is, after all, a force dammed up primarily in the 'unconscious' which only takes on the negative character of might where its origin remains unconscious" (p. 137).

Thus, by bringing the origin of fear forward, we can conquer it.

Confidence, or the belief in one's own ability, is built on the experience of success (Waitley, 1979). By enhancing students' successful experiences, confidence can be raised.

Competence implies an overall ability to perform, usually at a specific level of expertise. In public speaking, basic competency includes a generally smooth delivery of a number of specific points in a clear, coherent, and interesting manner. By giving students daily opportunities for successful experiences, the probability of raising their overall level of competency increases.

Human Potential Movement

This movement, which began in the 1960's in the Big Sur region of California at the Esalen Institute (Bloch, 1990-1991), encompasses the fields of humanism, psychotherapy, Gestalt therapy, and group therapy (Bloch, 1990-1991; Sipe, 1987). All of these fields offer practices that can enhance self-empowerment. Thus, that movement influences this work.

Self-empowerment Movement

Although not labeled as such elsewhere, this "movement," like the Human Potential Movement, is eclectic. It encompasses techniques from work with the "basic self," self-esteem, positive thinking, and cognitive work. It, too, influences the work at hand

by offering a variety of self-empowerment techniques to select.

Basic Self Work

Work with Insight Seminar's the "basic self," or Carl Jung's "Divine Child," or Rochelle Learner's "inner child,"or Charles Whitfield's "Child Within," or Emmet Fox's "Wonder Child,"or Alice Miller and Donald Winnicott's "true self" (Whitfield, 1989) is about freeing one's creative, energetic, and spontaneous nature. *Because of the inherent value of this type of work, basic self activities form the cornerstone upon which self-empowerment techniques are built.* They make a difference for many students.

Generally, work with the basic self involves discovery and practice with a student's "inner child" to (a) identify needs, (b) learn how to have them met, (c) do truth-telling, and to (d) identify core issues (Whitfield, 1989). These four steps tend to "free" or unblock creativity, energy, and spontaneity. This, plus the activities themselves, paves the way for public speaking success.

Classroom Activities

Basic self activities are activities that encourage creativity, fun, spontaneity, and play. The focus is on the "inner child," and on becoming personally powerful through self-expression. For example, blowing bubbles between phrases while talking on stage, sharing childhood games, speaking with teddy bears in their arms,

coloring snakes while learning to make mistakes, and inventing new uses for a Koosh ball are just a few basic self activities.

"New-twist" impromptus can likewise focus on the basic self. These impromptus are activities created from everyday objects like reading lines from a quote book, telling your birth story, selling things from a grocery bag, noticing items of clothing worn in the classroom, practicing sports gestures on stage, or drawing nonsense pictures on the board and explaining them.

Desensitizers are also used. Here, students "practice" common speech mistakes, they try out potential speech beginnings and endings, they drop their papers, try to forget their lines so they can ask for help, stumble on stage, answer random questions, model good questioning behavior, and practice standing on stage long enough to hear their applause.

In fact, many activities can be converted into basic self activities when you, as the teacher encouraging the "inner child" to participate. Your job is to get the students to have fun while they gradually practice small parts of the speech experience.

As Nyquist and Wulff (1990) point out, there is a potential for long-term value from activities like these. Of them, they say, "instructional games, simulations, and role plays can enhance relevance of course materials as students apply it in situations

often designed to take them beyond the immediate classroom. Thus, the methods have the potential to increase generalizability of course content" (p. 352). This is a good, common-sense reason to include games in the curriculum, and it follows that many of the "basic self" activities should be included for the same reasons.

In addition to these basic self activities, you might try having students do *written work*. I sometimes have them write their life stories, write in journals to record their progress over the semester, and write "Honesty Statements" at the beginning and end of the class to get them to say what they want out of your class and what they eventually received.

I also have them write *"advice essays"* where they tell a friend how to lower their anxiety by using the 20 *Finally Fearless* techniques I teach them in class. Taken from my book of the same title, students explain in writing the value of understanding anxiety, change, dissonance, and desensitization, balancing the three selves, learning to play, making mistakes, changing your negative thoughts, using affirmations, using visualizations, using positive self-talk, thinking of the audience first, speaking from the heart, having a plan, getting some practice, using guided imagery, learning to laugh, patting the butterflies out, setting support, and using bibliotherapy. Once they explain them to a friend, I feel

confident that they understand them well enough to use them. Especially for the very quiet students, these writing activities allow them to think about their personal growth and focus on areas where they might still need to do some work. These individual written activities are in contrast to the previous set of activities, which were more group-oriented.

Visualizations (which are self-created pictures in the mind's eye) (Gawain, 1978) are also used with the group to teach students to picture themselves confidently and competently giving their speeches. They learn to imagine all aspects of the speech process. They are encouraged to let their minds wander onto mental pictures of themselves performing each task brilliantly. They are also encouraged to "spot visualize" when they're waiting in line somewhere and "see" just part of a future speech. In addition, I have them "change heads" with great speakers, pretending in their mind's eye that they are giving the great speech they are watching. Over time, students remark that their visualizations begin to resemble their performances. Most visualizations occur at home when students have more time to concentrate.

Affirmations (which are positive statements in the present tense used to express those pictures) (Hay, 1984) are also used to involve the sense of "inner sight" (through imagination) and the

sense of "inner self-talk." The following statements are typical affirmations: "I am a great speaker." "I'm always ready for my speeches." "I'm learning to relax with each experience." "It's like me to do a terrific job on my speeches." and "I welcome the unexpected while speaking." To be effective, students should write their affirmations several times and repeat them often. This will allow them to become a part of the students' thinking over time. In class, we examine their negative thoughts, help them rephrase them as positive affirmations, and encourage them to say their affirmations at home in front of a mirror. Many students report success over time with the use of this activity.

Guided imagery (which combines both techniques into an imagined journey or scene) (Semigran, 1988) is also helpful, particularly for relaxation and systematic desensitization. Usually, the instructor dims the lights, asks the students to listen to the imagined scene as it is being spoken, and asks them to participate in their imaginations. A typical "journey" might be to the stage where their next speech is to take place. The students are then "talked through" the experience, mentally practicing in flawless detail all components of their upcoming speech. Or, they may listen to a relaxation tape, where they are asked to participate by picturing themselves relaxed and centered.

All of the previously-described activities are potentially self-empowering. Their strength lies in their ability to raise awareness of the value of positive, present-oriented self-talk. By taking responsibility for their own learning as a daily strategy, students gradually learn to empower themselves.

Other things you can do include the use of *small group activities* such as diads (groups of two people), triads (three people), small groups, and whole groups. By mixing the use of these throughout the semester, students can learn cross-contextual communication skills.

Diads and triads work well with activities focusing on student self-disclosure and student feedback. These one-to- one or one-to-two configurations allow more individual attention for each participant, and allow each person the chance to explore feelings or fears in a non-threatening way.

This discussion in no way exhausts all of the self-empowerment techniques available for use, but it does describe the range of activities used in the seven experiential classrooms in this pilot study. Books on self-empowerment and self-improvement offer interesting activities that can be adapted for use. Choose ones that ask for creative expression from the basic self and call for a stretch out of one's comfort zone (Carnegie, 1962).

Methods

Subjects

Subjects are 180 students in seven required public speaking classes at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, over a two-year period of time. The age range is from 18-45, with the mean age being at or near 20 years old.

Conditions

During the first four days of classes, the students are appraised of the experiential nature and personal growth focus of the course. They are told that this class is "different," and that it is both demanding and highly participatory in nature. They are encouraged to drop the class if they want a more traditional approach. This is done to pare enrollment to a manageable size and to get students to make a decision to cooperate with the use of the experiential methods. Usually, of the 30-33 originally enrolled, about 24 to 27 students remain.

Procedures

Many evaluative tools are used. The PRCA-24 (McCroskey, 1986), Gamble and Gamble's "Speech Fright Quotient" (1990, p. 404), and "honesty statements" (150-word self-reports of confidence, competence, and fear levels) are used as pretests. During the public speaking phase, peer, teacher, and self- evaluations are

used. Three formal tests are also administered. Included in the tests are ongoing honesty statements that document progress over time. Students are also assigned grades based on their speeches, tests, and participation. Finally, students use exit honesty statements to evaluate their overall progress during the semester.

The majority of the classroom activities are experiential. Notes are given on the text, but they are distilled to "essential" content. Borowy and McGuire (1983) indicate that the positive effects of experiential learning have been studied since at least the time of John Dewey (1938) (p. 146). Also, it should be remembered that children are accelerated learners (Meier, 1985), and that they generally learn by experience. College students, though certainly not children, can also benefit from the hands-on experience. Thus, to maximize learning potential, experiential methods are used.

The day-to-day format includes a mixture of extemporaneous and impromptu speeches, notes, lecturettes, experiential individual and group activities, discussions, and the use of the "P.I.G. page." The P.I.G. page states the Purpose, Intended results, and Groundrules for the class. As a group, the class reads the purpose aloud, which is: "To demonstrate my true potential to communicate effectively with myself and others, and to do so with dignity, grace, and integrity." The students then choose their

individual goals for the day (from the intended results or groundrules lists) and quickly and energetically share their goals in a random, spontaneous fashion until all the goals are shared. The students' challenge is to make the activity fast, fun, and entertaining. This is a high-energy introduction that helps set the pace for the day's activities.

Results

Before the end of the first year of teaching, this instructor received the 1990 Chancellor's Award for Outstanding Service in the area of Teaching for Adjunct Faculty. As the nominating department head wrote, ". . . this overwhelming degree of success [was had] in teaching the basic Fundamentals of Oral Communication Class. . . the one so many students fear with a passion and often try to avoid until the very end" (Connors, 1990).

Something positive and unusual is happening in these classes. It could be the product of a high-energy teaching style, a supportive climate, the use of positive, present-oriented self-talk, the use of the *Finally Fearless!* techniques, the experiential, self-empowering activities, or some combination of the above.

Future research might attempt to isolate the specific causes of this success. In this pilot study the attention has been focused on simply describing the positive and unusual outcomes observed.

Two other sources of information tend to corroborate these observations. First, each of the 180 students generated feedback roughly equivalent to four comments on each of four honesty statements, for a total of 2,880 comments. While the content of these statements focused on positive changes in confidence and competence, the majority of this feedback was also positive, enthusiastic, and warmly supportive.

Second, all seven classes were evaluated by the students. ANOVAS were run on the means comparing individual scores using this method to department-wide scores and to scores across the university. All of the means for the scores were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level ($df\ 2/18$). For example, on a 1-7 scale, the means of the three most important questions are as follows: (a) "to what extent did the instructor create a desire to learn" had means of 6.88 experiential, 6.40 department, and 5.94 university; (b) "overall knowledge increased by this class experience" had means of 6.44 experiential, 6.11 department, and 5.97 university; and (c) "overall course rating" had means of 6.65 experiential, 6.34 department, and 5.93 university.

Beaty and Zahn (1990) found that students tend to rate teachers fairly, despite higher levels of sociability in likable teachers. Using this, these evaluations can be seen as fair, given

the consistency of the results across all classes over the two years.

Beaty and Zahn (1990) also say that "high ratings point to healthy student-teacher interaction, an outcome that is in the best interest of the educator, the department, and the field" (p. 281). That these evaluations are consistently high is an indication that the relationship is indeed quite healthy.

Discussion

Based on the findings reported here, the first hypothesis, that "Students will value speech education that uses self-empowerment techniques presented experientially" is supported. However, some caution is in order due to the possibility that a "halo effect" is present. It should be noted that students "sold" on the value of the teaching method tend to be biased in evaluating their self-selected method. Those who chose to drop the course may have made negative comments had they stayed in the class.

The second hypothesis, that "As students' self-concepts improve, their confidence and competence levels will also improve" is also supported, but perhaps not as well. Though the self-reports on individual student progress showed strong, positive linear relationships (as students reported greater degrees of confidence, their speech grades also improved), self-reports alone do not adequately measure confidence and competence. More objective

measures of these two variables might be used.

Another possible limitation is the lack of "outside" observers who could document and corroborate findings. As Javidi, Downs, and Nussbaum (1988) insist, "To understand teaching, we must see and observe teaching" (p. 286). Perhaps outside observers could be incorporated into future studies.

More research needs to be done in this newly-developing area of self-empowerment in the classroom. *Knowing what helps students raise their levels of self-esteem, self-worth, and self-confidence is of prime importance to public speaking teachers.* We now have the opportunity to increase the value of the education we offer our students. That is worth the effort it may take.

As Borowy and McGuire (1983) so aptly remark, we have the tools to "positively affect students on intellectual and personal levels. [We] . . . must attempt to provide more global, meaningful, humanistic curricula through which students will not only learn theoretical and informational data, but also experience personally relevant and growth-enhancing processes" (p. 151).

The time to begin is now.

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