

## **Life in a Fishbowl: Student Perception Data for Long-term Center Sustainability**

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Communication center directors, staff and tutors must continually analyze student perception of the center space in order to promote long-term campus viability. Thus, this manuscript addresses perceptions of communication center liberal arts students at a small, southern private university. Through surveys, students were asked how they utilize the communication center space, what projects they worked on as communication center participants, and improvement for the future. The measure for this study included a survey with questions that addressed Fishbowl use, technology or furniture use in the Fishbowl, the feedback process on student projects, and Fishbowl improvements. Situated learning theory is presented as a theoretical framework for communication center success and collaborative learning.

*Keywords:* Communication center, communication, situated learning theory, student perception

### **Rationale**

In 2015, Kathleen Turner offered several benefits of Communication Center research and mentioned areas for future study. One question for Turner (2015) was the determination and improvement of instructional materials, and thus instructional spaces, through theoretically grounded, methodologically diverse studies. Bellarmine University, to engage the 21st century learner, created a multimodal communication center in the School of Communication. This center, affectionately known as the Fishbowl, houses a green screen, one-button studio, collaboration stations, Mac computers, and classrooms with video recording capabilities. In this piece, the authors explore the evolution of the Fishbowl as an instructional space, by surveying Bellarmine students who have used the Fishbowl for classes, peer collaboration, projects involving educational technology, etc. By asking students

themselves about the center, we can know how our centers serve the university populations (Turner, 2015). Ultimately, this manuscript represents yet another attempt to, as Turner (2015) wrote, share “the fruits of our labors [to] strengthen our centers by providing the enrichment afforded by synergy, cross-testing, and elaboration of key principles” (p. 3).

### **Literature Review**

We believe communication centers are vital learning spaces. Students today want relevant projects, applied perspectives, and there is an increased need for viable learning spaces on college campuses. This literature review will present a foundation that focuses on a theoretical lens for this study, an overview of assessment, and a presentation of our communication center learning space.

## Situated Learning Theory

Communication centers can be effective platforms for communities of learning practice. The ability for students to teach one another while engaging unofficially in the peer-teacher model is especially necessary when taking budget constraints into consideration. In the case of the Fishbowl, which will be described below, budgetary restrictions force us to cede the use of official student tutors and even prevent us from having substantial workshops or seminars. As a result, our reliance on student-to-student feedback and informal participatory learning is essential to the success of the center.

As our communication center continues to evolve organically and institutionally, we believe it is important to collect student perceptions on the communication center. As a viable and collaborative space, the communication center is a natural community of practice and can be an example of what Lave and Wenger (1991) referred to as a location for substantial situated learning. Student collaboration and community learning can develop through the vital communication center space.

Situated learning, as a theoretical framework, is an ideal descriptor of the Fishbowl as it is currently constructed. Lave and Wenger (1991), argue that situated learning is concerned with two main discussion points: 1) learners “inevitably” participate in communities of practitioners and 2) knowledge and skill mastery requires full participation in a sociocultural community of practice. On many campuses, the communication center is a living, breathing example of a community of practice wherein student content knowledge and skill development are enhanced because of their involvement with, and feedback from, other learners.

Communication centers can engage students in information transfer while also serving as incubators of collaborative learning. As facilitating mechanisms for learning, communication centers can provide opportunities for learning and social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is important, too, that communication centers embrace the concept of situated learning wherein learning is not just relegated to one activity, but rather is viewed as an aspect of all activity. What does this mean for communication center staff and development? It means that the act of collaboration, and casual social interactions within the center, can be catalysts for learning.

Formally, and conventionally, learning is viewed as the process of internalizing knowledge. Situated learning theory reverses course on this historical definition and, instead, focuses on the social dimension of learning and formulates a theory of learning as a dimension of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe conventional learning and social practice in this way:

Conventional explanations view learning as a process by which a learner internalizes knowledge, whether “discovered,” “transmitted” from others, or “experienced in interaction” with others...But there is common ground for exploring [theoretical] integral, constitutive relations, [theoretical] entailments, and effects in a framework of social practice theory, in which the production, transformation, and change in the identities of persons, knowledgeable skills in practice, and communities of practice are realized in the lived-in world of engagement in everyday activity. (p. 47)

This type of learning, learning as participation in a community of practice, is

concerned with the whole person, not just the mind. Further, we concur with Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is not just a relation to specific activities but a relation, also, to the social community. Therefore, the ability to become involved in new activities, master new skills or content, and perform new tasks can result from active engagement in a community of practice.

As we solicited student feedback about communication center experiences, we found that the community component (both as a social organism and knowledge facilitator) was crucial. Within a community of practice students can talk about (stories, community lore) and talk within (exchange information necessary to the progress of ongoing activities) a practice. Further, as Lave and Wenger (1991) point out, both forms of *talk* fulfill specific functions: engaging, focusing, and shifting attention and supporting communal forms of memory and reflection, as well as signaling membership. This “talk” was the primary focus of our data collection and we recognize, in order to understand student use and perceptions of their communication center involvement, continual assessment and collection of student perception is crucial.

### Assessment

Recently, there have been prevalent reminders for communication centers to engage in timely and relevant assessment (Turner, 2015; Anderson, Hearit, Morgan, & Natt, 2015; Leek, Carpenter, Cuny, & Rao, 2015). Additionally, many centers struggle with similar issues such as funding. Effective assessment can clarify to university administration how the center fits within the broader scope of the institution and can reinforce the center’s value for students. So, when Turner (2015) asks “How do we demonstrate what our clients have

gained from using the communication center” (p. 5), center faculty and staff should engage in meaningful assessment that demonstrates how students are served through initiatives that often have a shoestring budget (Turner, 2015).

Further, the ability to distinguish center effectiveness and strategy has tremendous value for the communication center body of literature and data can be used to establish a clear “return on investment” for clients and users. In order to determine how a culture functions, short-term qualitative studies, surveys, and interviews are appropriate methodologies (Maximini, 2015). The study described below incorporates survey data to measure student perceptions of the communication center at a liberal arts university.

**Description of the Fishbowl.** Before describing this study it is necessary to provide a contextual overview of the communication center space. The Fishbowl is a multiliteracy center that is open to all Bellarmine students. It gets its name from the large glass wall that separates the space from those walking past the room in the hall. The space is open 24-hours a day and features Mac computers with the Adobe Creative Suite, two wall-mounted televisions connected to Direct TV--one television, the 70-inch flat screen, has a HDMI cable attached to it for students to connect their laptops, and the “One-Button Studio” -- a room with a camera, microphone, and computer ready for students to record video with the push of a single button.

Before it became The Fishbowl, the room was an oddly-shaped, underutilized classroom used for lectures. The room was modified into one open space, two small work stations, one classroom with video recording capabilities, and two faculty offices. The open space has four sections.

The first, is nearest the glass wall and has a large table. This space is primarily used by student groups and small communication classes. Further in the area is a peninsula counter with four Mac computers. This section is used by students working on class projects and for students editing video in television news courses. Beyond this section are two areas. One features a large screen TV and coffee-shop style tables and stools, and the other section has comfortable, movable seating and small tables--similar to a living room set up. These two sections are used by student groups and organization. The TV is also used for capstone and thesis presentations.

In addition to this open space, there are two small workstations different by design. One is a colorful, closet-like room with a glass wall. This room has two Mac computers and a small table--this room is a favorite for students needing a quiet space or for a small group to discuss a project. The other small room is the one-button studio.

Finally, there is The Fishbowl classroom at the back of the space. This room seats 20 students and is used to teach public speaking and for student organizations in the evening. The room has a SmartBoard and a separate instructor station in the back that is used to record student speeches directly in Bellarmine's LMS--Moodle.

Students are free to use any space in The Fishbowl for any reason. Students often use the space to write papers, design videos, and collaborate on group projects. While there is no person officially in charge of the space, two professors have offices at the back of the space. One professor has a glass wall looking into The Fishbowl. This professor answers software questions, reports things that are not working to IT, and offers formal and informal tours of the space when donors are visiting campus. Computers are updated and software is

purchased with money collected by the lab fees of the classes which utilize the space.

## **Methods**

This method section describes the study participants, instruments used, procedures employed, and data analysis process for this study. IRB approval was obtained for this project. The researchers obtained informed consent from all the students participating in the study. To recruit participants, researchers distributed the survey link to select majors. The specific procedures are described in detail in the following paragraphs.

This study assessed student perceptions of the communication center from various perspectives. Generally, students were asked how they utilize the communication center space, what projects they have worked on as communication center participants, and improvement if they had ideas for the future.

**Instruments.** The measure for this study included a survey that addressed basic demographic questions (like participant age, race, grade level, major, etc.), Fishbowl use, technology or furniture use in the Fishbowl, the feedback process on student projects, and Fishbowl improvements. Open-ended responses were examined by two researchers. Specifically, the two researchers read and discovered emergent themes present in each question. Researchers then compared themes, discussed differences, and agreed upon the codebook. Each researcher coded all of the student responses for both redundancy and intensity (Creswell, 2013).

## **Findings**

All participants for this study were students enrolled at a small private liberal

arts southern university. A total of 60 ( $n = 60$ ) student participants completed the survey for this project. All students, per IRB, consented to the use of their work for research purposes. Student ages included 20 (33.33%) who reported being 18-20, 35 (58.33%) reported themselves as 21-29, 3 (5%) reported their age as 40-49, and 2 (3.33%) reported themselves as 50-59. Student races included, primarily, 53 (88.3%) white students, 3 (5%) black or African-American, 3 (5%) Asian, and 1 (1.67%) Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Further, when reporting credit hour distinction, 5 (8.62%) reported themselves as Freshman, 11 (18.97%) Sophomore, 11 (18.97%) Junior, and 20 (34.48%) Senior, and 11 (18.97%) reported themselves as Graduate Students.

The survey was sent out to majors who either: a) have class routinely in the Fishbowl or b) would be more inclined to visit the Fishbowl space, according to the Center Director. Thus, student majors included Communication, Design, Art, and Technology (DAT), Digital Media, Business, Psychology, Art, and Theology. However, the overwhelming major represented was Communication. Of the respondents, 52 (86.67%) have used the Fishbowl space within the last 12 months. In order to determine student perception of the Fishbowl and practical center uses, students were asked a series of open-ended reflective questions.

**Survey Results.** Students were asked about Fishbowl technology and/or furniture used in the Fishbowl, as well as activities performed in the space. Specifically, students were asked *what technology or furniture [they] have used in the Fishbowl*, and 14 (25%) reported using the Green Screen, 26 (46.43%) the Board Room (or Conference Room) Table, 3 (5.36%) reported using the Video to DVD

Converter, 45 (80%) the MAC computers, 25 (44.64%) reported using the Television, 36 (64.29%) reported using the Elevated Coffee House Style Furniture, 21 (37.50%) reported using the Whiteboards, 14 (25%) reported using the One Button Studio and 39 (69.64%) reported that they have used the Fishbowl classroom. For this question, students could choose more than one responses.

When asked about the *types of projects students work on in the Fishbowl*, there were three main responses: (1) multimedia projects (i.e. animation or documentary film work), (2) communication projects (i.e. sports broadcasting or basic communication homework and practicing speeches), (3) group discussion (i.e. meetings for organizations such as the student newspaper or campus radio). Two quotes specifically illustrate main projects in the Fishbowl. One student said “I use the space exclusively to speak to classmates about projects I’m working on, if not I’m using the One Button Studio.” Another student said they “work on most of my projects in the Fishbowl [like] Prezis, papers, research, readings, websites...you name it!”

To further elaborate on activities in the Fishbowl, students were asked to *write a few sentences about activities or classes that [they] have participated in that took place in the Fishbowl*. One student indicated that they “...typically use the Fishbowl to discuss class material and projects, both outside and during class time...I’ve also used the green screen and one button studio for video projects for class.” Several students also reported using the Mac computers for editing purposes. For example, one student said “I have used the Macs often for the Adobe Suite” and another said “We do a lot of editing stuff with garage band.” Overwhelmingly, students discussed using the Fishbowl for class (i.e. TV Production,

Radio Lab, Strategic Communication, NEXU-a student driven client based PR firm, etc.). Further, student responses reveal several themes. For the question about activities or classes that took place in the Fishbowl, main themes included (1) multimedia, (2) class, (3) software, (4) study, (5) discussion, (6) social, (7) meetings. Coding categories, themes, and sample quotes are displayed in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Write a few sentences about activities or classes that you have participated in that took place in the Fishbowl.*

Theme	Quote
Multimedia	“I have worked on the Mac computers to complete audio and video projects.”
Class	“I had strategic communication and law and ethics classes in the Fishbowl. I’ve had some other classes meet [there] on select nights.”
Software	“I use the Macs often for the Adobe Suite [software].”
Study	“I use the Fishbowl for studying.”
Discussion	“I use the Fishbowl for studying.”
Social	“We used the Fishbowl for group discussions.”
Meetings	“I [have also] had a meet and greet in the Fishbowl area as part of the orientation for

the graduate program.”

“I have used the Fishbowl for group meetings.”

A follow-up question asked students *why they would not have utilized the Fishbowl collaborative learning space* and participants said that sometimes the Fishbowl is busy (which impedes their desire), that they did not know it existed, they did not know it could be used outside of communication classes, time, and that they do not need to use the equipment that is offered. One student in particular said that they “...had class in the classroom in the back of the Fishbowl two years ago but since then I haven’t used it. I just haven’t needed to use it but I always see people in their so I know it is getting a lot of use.”

Participants were also asked about offering and receiving feedback about student projects. Of the participants, 14 (23.73%) said that they did offer feedback to someone working on a project in the Fishbowl (outside of a classroom experience), while 45 (76.27%) said that they had not offered feedback. Further, 14 (23.73%) said that they did receive feedback to someone working on a project in the Fishbowl (outside of a classroom experience), while 45 (76.27%) said that they had never received feedback. When asked to elaborate and share their experiences of receiving feedback on a project in the Fishbowl, open-ended responses indicated that students typically engaged in mentoring relationships in the feedback even so far as mentioning undergraduate and graduate relationships regarding the Fishbowl. One student even said “Some of the undergraduate students that I’ve talked to love the Fishbowl.” Another student also said “because of the

computer setup, it is easy to ask a fellow student for their opinion on what I am working on.” Students also mentioned feedback relationships with peers and professors. One student specifically mentioned having “a friend give one of my videos a second look to see if they thought it looked good.” Additionally, when speaking about professor or instructor feedback, a student said “I have gotten assistance from a couple professors in the Fishbowl.” Interestingly, one student even referred to feedback as a conversation by saying the feedback “wasn’t so much feedback as it was conversation about the work I was doing.”

While feedback was an important component of this study, students were also asked to *elaborate and share [their] experience working on a project in the Fishbowl*. One student, reflecting on their project experiences, said “I didn’t get to finish an assignment in class, so I completed it in the Fishbowl. One thing I liked about this experience was, being self-taught in film making, a video class was going on at the same time [there] discussing things I would like to learning (sic) about.” Student responses for this question revealed several themes. For the question about activities or classes that took place in the Fishbowl, main themes included (1) discussion, (2) software, (3) hardware, (4) social, (5) space, (6) furniture, (7) feedback. Coding categories, themes, and sample quotes for this question are displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

*Please elaborate and share your experience of working on a project in the Fishbowl.*

Theme	Quote
Discussion	“I like to have [a] group discussion in the Fishbowl.”
Software	

Hardware	“I’ve completed assignments using Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop this semester.”
Social	“I have enjoyed using the Mac computers in the Fishbowl.”
Space	“Most of the time, it can be loud working on a project in the Fishbowl if people are using it for social reasons.”
Furniture	“It was so refreshing and felt so much more organized that trying to meet at the library or somewhere else and I like the Fishbowl because there is a lot of room to spread out.”
Feedback	“I met in the little room when you first walk in to the Fishbowl with the table and glass window to work on a Prezi with another student.”
	“I’m asked informally on a variety of projects, usually in a casual and quick invitation to take a look or give a listen.”

The survey ended with questions about the Fishbowl as a whole and student impressions about the present, and future, of the Fishbowl. First, students were asked *how could the Fishbowl be improved*. Responses for question revealed several themes. Specifically, main themes included (1) hardware, (2) use, (3) space, (4) technology. The researchers removed responses about the Fishbowl remaining the same. Coding categories, themes, and sample quotes for this question are displayed in Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
*How could the Fishbowl be improved?*

Theme	Quote
Hardware	“[The Fishbowl needs] more equipment for student use.”
Use	“I think we could use the Fishbowl for more broadcasting opportunities.”
Space	“Better signage that [show] all students can use resources in the Fishbowl...it would also be great if it wasn’t locked on weekends.”
Technology	“The green screen is a great idea but does not work well. Since there are shadows and whatnot that change the color detected by the computer, it does not work for video editing. If we could have some lights

that make it all even that would be much more useful.”

Second, students were asked *what features of the Fishbowl should stay the same*. Responses for question revealed several themes. Specifically, main themes included (1) furniture, (2) design, (3) hardware, (4) technology. The researchers removed responses about the Fishbowl remaining the same. Coding categories, themes, and sample quotes for this question are displayed in Table 4.

**Table 4.**  
*What features of the Fishbowl should remain the same?*

Theme	Quote
Furniture	“...the coffee style tables, the comfortable chairs.”
Design	“The classroom is a nice learning space design.”
Hardware	“Ability to connect to the television, Mac computers.”
Technology	“The green screen should definitely stay.”

Third, students were asked *what aspects of the Fishbowl you find most useful*. Students mentioned similar aspects to those elements that should remain the same (i.e. technology, design, hardware, furniture, etc.) but one quote did stand out. One student mentioned that “the collaborative ethos of the Fishbowl is most useful.”

The final survey question asked students to reflect, generally, on the

Fishbowl. Students were, specifically, asked to *please include any additional thoughts you have about the Fishbowl*. Student quotes were positive and encouraging for this question. For instance, one student indicated that the Fishbowl is “a peaceful and interesting environment” and that it is “a very nice space that [I feel] has been underused by many students.” Further, one quote by a student indicated that they would like to spend more time in the Fishbowl. This student said, “[I would like] to spend more time in class working in the Fishbowl on class projects and utilizing its features; and would like to spend more time working in [the] Fishbowl outside of class.”

The School of Communication has also benefited from the Fishbowl. One student said that the Fishbowl “is their favorite part of the COMM building” while another said “I absolutely love the Fishbowl. It is a wonderful addition to the COMM building...I cannot imagine my college career without it. To share one last quote, a student mentioned that “the Fishbowl is a neat, laid back space that [I like] studying in and having class. It’s a different atmosphere from a typical library space, but I think that’s what makes it so great.”

### **Limitations**

While this study did provide valuable feedback, there are limitations. Primarily, a larger number of number of respondents, as well as a more diverse undergraduate/graduate major representation would have provided more robust data. This is important, especially, when taking into consideration The Fishbowl as a campus space.

### **Discussion**

The results of the survey provide concrete application for this communication

center and, hopefully, others. Lave and Wenger (1991) believe “activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation, rather, they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning” (p. 53). The communication center can, and should, act as a community of practice or a catalyst for “relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). The results above highlight how the center has taken on a communicative life of its own thanks to its design and the willingness of students to engage, collaboratively, in the center.

The physical design of the communication center should allow for collaborative thinking and hearkens back to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) appeal for a space that provides for social and cooperative practice. Additionally, if we are to agree with Lave and Wenger (1991), that situated learning is concerned with learner participation in communities of practice, and the fact that knowledge and skill mastery requires participation in a sociocultural community, then we cannot minimize the physical location and design of a communication center that allows for full and unbridled participatory and social learning. It is invaluable for students to hear from peers and professors about projects, multimedia deliverables, and course assignments. The high-touch Fishbowl environment is well-suited to achieve a situated learning dimension that highlights community-based practice.

As collaborative learning spaces like the Fishbowl look to the future, Apostel & Apostel (2017) have several suggestions worthy of consideration. Among those are to favor flexibility over rigidity, public over private, and open spaces over closed. Tables, chairs, and other items must be moveable to fit the needs of those using the

spaces. New items and regulations must not impede this function. Spaces should also remain open to the campus for a wide-range of uses; private spaces should be kept to offices. And open spaces allow students, faculty, and staff to look freely in on the collaboration and production taking place in the space. If a section is to be closed, it should be temporary and then quickly opened.

Technology purchases should also be considered carefully as the space evolves. Eventually, the computers and other items in the space will be outdated, and ethical disposal or recycling of the technology becomes a consideration. Apostel and Apostel (2015) tell purchasers of technology to consider hardware that incorporates free, open source software when applicable. This helps keep down costs and increases the chance of a community of active, online users to find solutions to issues that may come up during the life of the technology. When purchasing hardware, keep the users in mind. If a technology is too difficult to pick up quickly, the odds are that the technology will not be used in the first place. And finally, dispose of outdated hardware with ethical companies that follow WEEE (Directive on Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) guidelines.

Further, the mere presence of the communication center, as a unique space to the communication center, allowed communication students (and even those from other majors) to build relationships and practical skill in a center designed to facilitate learning, again, a necessary ingredient for situated learning. For the communication center to remain a viable campus space, directors would do well to heed the advice of students. Design matters, placement is critical, and technology updates are essential.

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