

Using a Mixed-Methodological Approach to Assess the Communication Lab: Gaining Insights and Making Improvements

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Abstract

The basic course is under increased pressure to complete assessments that report student achievement and learning outcomes, and the results often have funding implications (Liefner, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Many of these assessments rely primarily on quantitative forms of data collection and analysis (Morreale, Backlund, Hay & Moore, 2011). However, these reports are only a partial portrayal of the student experience since quantitatively focused assessments tend to neglect student voices and emotion. This paper highlights the benefits of incorporating a qualitative perspective into basic course assessment work, specifically an assessment of the help provided by a communication lab (com lab). Through individual and collective observations, as well as an analysis of 99 open-ended prompts from 165 standard post-visit student surveys, we found a tension that was created when the lab's need for efficiency and effectiveness did not align with the students' need for a supportive learning environment. Two overarching themes -- interactional and organizational

constraints -- emerged that illuminated the tension that would otherwise have been overlooked in a traditional quantitative assessment of the com lab. These findings provide clear avenues for improvement that can enhance learning outcomes and impact available funding, while also legitimizing the need to incorporate a mixed-methodological approach to traditional assessment work in the basic course.

In the eighth version of the *Communication Education* basic course report, Morreale, Worley, and Hugenberg (2010) found that 15.4% of two-year institutions and 19.9% of four-year institutions had communication centers or oral communication labs, and that number was only expected to continue to grow. This was a substantial increase given that these basic course resources were not even mentioned in the original report (Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970). Despite this increase in the implementation of communication labs on college campuses, there is a lack of corresponding research, especially concerning questions of student experience (Jones, Hunt, Simonds, Comadena, & Baldwin, 2004; Morreale, 2001; Nelson, Whitfield, & Moreau, 2012).

Assessments used to determine the value or effectiveness of communication labs have traditionally relied on quantitative forms of data collection and analysis (Avanzino, 2010; Crocker-Lakness, 1990; Daly, 1994; see Morreale, Backlund, Hay & Moore, 2011 for a review of assessment within oral communication). This approach is preferred in part due to the increased pressure to report learning outcomes and demonstrate teaching effectiveness, which have become priorities in higher education (Boyd, Morgan, Ortiz, & Anderson, 2014). In addition, state, local, and institutional agencies are increasingly demanding that disciplines like communication develop policies, instrumentation, and procedures to demonstrate that both programs and students are producing results (Backlund, Hay, Harper, & Williams, 1989; Gray, 1989; Goulden, 2009). Within the field of communication, many measurement instruments have been developed for assessment; most of these instruments are quantitative and are focused on if instructors have met learning objectives for coursework (McCroskey, 2007).

A national survey of assessment trends in communication departments found that while most universities assess public speaking learning objectives by using course evaluations, many

state legislatures and regional accreditation agencies have begun requiring programs to implement more systematic assessments (Hay, 1992). In a longitudinal study of the basic communication course in 2010, only 12.6% of respondents ($n = 11$) reported there was no formal assessment process for their basic course (Morreale, et al., 2010). However, there was no mention of the basic course communication lab or assessment of the basic course communication lab. As such, a call has been issued for more assessment of the basic communication course and supporting resources, like communication labs, so that communication educators can better establish the impact of basic communication courses (Hay, 1992). These data are important to further aid in discovering how the basic course is achieving (or falling short of) its learning objectives and to understand other issues related to student success, such as student empowerment (Brann-Barrett & Rolls, 2004; Jones et al., 2004). This paper responds to that call by providing an analysis of an assessment project conducted on a small basic course communication help lab.

Literature Review

This research resides at the intersection of two areas: the role of mixed-methodological approaches to assessment work and the extant literature on communication labs. These two topics will structure the following literature review.

Mixed-Methods Approaches to Assessment Work

Quantitative and qualitative methods, when applied to an assessment context, have been found to complement each other nicely (Thompson & Vaccaro, 2009). For example, Thompson and Vaccaro (2009) explored the often-contested terrain of the quantitative and qualitative methodological debate and the assumptions that underpin each approach. They demonstrated how taking a mixed-methodological approach is beneficial to demonstrating importance and understanding issues within higher education. In doing so, the authors provided examples of designs that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative forms of data collection (e.g., mixed-method survey, quantitative survey/focus group, and survey/individual interview) in order to argue that more assessments use a mixed-methods approach.

While assessment literature oftentimes employs a quantitative approach (for an example, see Boyd et al., 2014), qualitative research is used to develop a deeper understanding of a given phenomenon, or one that prioritizes people's lived experiences. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) echoed this when they explained, "the chief value of qualitative research lies in achieving in-depth understanding of social reality in a specific context" (p. 109). Qualitative research is often "characterized as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher's experience in collecting and analyzing the data" (Creswell, 2007, p. 19) as it seeks to answer fundamental questions for qualitative researchers. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) identify some fundamental questions for qualitative researchers, including:

What is going on here? What is being accomplished? How do "they" do it? How does this activity change, depending on who is doing it and when and where? How do "they" understand and justify the things "they" do? Who are "they" – both to me and to themselves? Who am "I" to them? And finally, how is this knowledge useful to communication scholars and professionals, as well as the general public? (p. 4).

A few of these qualitative research questions directly relate to the experiences of students in communication labs, such as "What is going on here? What is being accomplished?" In order to address these types of questions, qualitative researchers generally employ what Creswell (2007) termed as "an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry." This includes the "collection of data...and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns of themes" (p. 37).

We argue that a mixed-methods approach, one that integrates qualitative and quantitative data, better allows basic course administrators to uncover previously hidden tensions and understand the experiences of students who use the basic communication course lab. While the quantitative data have proven helpful in confirming the value of the Com Lab, basic course administrators involved with this lab felt as if they did not have a full picture of what was happening in the Com Lab. As a result, utilizing a mixed-methods approach can lead

to a better adaptation and improvement of the procedures and practices for the Com Lab and communication labs.

Communication Labs

There are many names for what we refer to as a communication lab. Other institutions may call this basic course resource a speech lab or oral communication centers, but the function remains the same (Jones et al., 2004). Communication labs supplement classroom instruction (Helsel & Hogg, 2006). As Brann-Barrett and Rolls (2004) explained, “the overarching goal of communication labs is to provide a context where students can learn experientially” (p. 73). In general, communication labs offer a variety of services including “assistance with topic generation, audience adaption, research for supporting material, organizational development, outlining, speech delivery, and review of self-recorded speeches” (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012, p. 126).

These services support the learning goals set forth by the basic course and past research has demonstrated improvement in a variety of areas for students who visit communication labs. These gains include improved grades (Hunt & Simonds, 2002) and decreased communication apprehension after visiting the communication labs on their campuses (Dwyer et al., 2002).

There have been multiple and continued calls for additional research focused on communication labs (Jones et al., 2004; Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Dwyer et al., 2002; Hunt & Simonds, 2002; Preston, 2006) because the extant research on communication labs is somewhat limited and primarily focuses on research questions that are best addressed through quantitative means (Morreale et al., 2011). For example, Nelson and her colleagues (2012) examined the relationship between help seeking behaviors, communication anxiety, and usage rates at the communication resource center. In addition, Dwyer and Davidson (2012) wanted to know how the services offered by the speech center affected oral communication learning outcomes (e.g., public speaking skills, confidence, and anxiety). Both of these pieces found that communication labs did positively affect learning outcomes.

While research questions like the ones posed by the scholars referred to above lend themselves to quantitative forms of data collection, the research would also benefit from

incorporating qualitative data that include the student voice. In doing so, the authors are able to not only show that improvement was achieved, but also explain how the improvement manifested from the perspective of the participants. With that said, we are extending the research on communication labs to include qualitative responses in addition to the traditionally quantitative approach to assessment work to better capture the layered and complex experiences students have when using the basic course communication lab.

Jones et al. (2004) started to fill this gap in their qualitative study of a communication lab. They found that communication labs are perceived by students to improve oral communication skills and decrease the amount of public speaking anxiety felt. However, only 10 students were interviewed. Thus, the authors called for a more comprehensive examination of the role communication labs play in terms of supporting the basic course through qualitative methods. Our study takes Jones et al. (2004) as a starting point and works to combine qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a better understanding of the student experience when using the Com Lab at a Midwestern university.

Communication labs contribute to the learning outcomes addressed in the basic course. With that said, Dwyer and Davidson (2012) expressed the need to include communication labs in basic course assessment work. This connection makes sense given that communication labs are instituted to contribute to the learning goals put forth by the basic course and appear to function well in this supporting role (Preston, 2006). Dwyer and Davidson (2012) underscore the important role communication labs play in supporting the goals of the basic course, communication departments, and general education requirements at the university-level. As such, the need to include communication labs in overall assessments was illuminated through this work.

Based on the existing literature, we developed overarching research questions to examine the Com Lab. Specifically, we asked:

RQ1: Do the qualitative data support the quantitative data? If so, how?

RQ2: Do the qualitative data differ from the quantitative data? If so, how?

RQ3: How can the Com Lab adapt to student needs?

Through our findings, each of these three research questions is addressed.

Summary

In this piece we advocate a mixed-methods approach to assessment and believe that the quantitative and qualitative data reveal very different aspects of the student experience. When used in conjunction, this data are better able to reveal what is happening in our labs and in our classrooms. This study examined students' experience with a small Com Lab across five semesters from spring 2012 to spring 2014 through a mixed-method approach. This method allowed for tensions in the data to emerge that revealed more than just usage data. This complexity enabled us to make changes in the operation of the resource to enhance the overall experience of our users and thus empower the student learner. In this paper we describe the lab and methodology employed in this assessment and emphasize findings that would have been difficult to uncover if we had relied only on quantitative data. We also highlight changes made to the lab based on student feedback from the assessment.

Description of the Com Lab

The Com Lab assessed in this study is a relatively new student resource that was developed for the basic course. In this case, the university's communication lab that was evaluated for this project serves a large basic course with over 3,000 students enrolled per semester. However, the lab itself is small and staffed by only two lab assistants. Both lab assistants are experienced basic course instructors and current doctoral students.

This resource is located in a standard faculty office in the school of communication, down a long corridor with offices on both sides. The hallway in which the office is located is in a rather quiet part of the department and experiences little undergraduate student traffic. The office itself is nondescript and has room for only two desks. It is not equipped with any type of technology (e.g., computer, projection system, recording capabilities).

The design of the space and corresponding layout make some of the items that students want to address during their appointment challenging. For example, there is little room to

practice delivering a presentation, especially if the student wants to work on aspects of physical delivery. In addition, the lack of computers acts as a barrier that prevents the lab staff and students from engaging in tasks like conducting research through the university's library system and editing outlines as they are discussed unless a student brings in an electronic copy of his/her outline on his/her computer.

The Com Lab is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. with additional availability provided when outlines are due and formal presentations are scheduled. Moreover, the two Com Lab assistants staff the lab as part of their respective assistantships and are only contracted for 20 hours per week. This restriction further limits the hours that the Com Lab can operate.

Current basic course students can request help on all parts of the speech process. Based on the Com Lab assistants' knowledge of the course as well as presentational speaking experience, students are provided with a variety of advice from the assistants, including topic selection suggestions, APA formatting help, outline development, and speaking tips. The Com Lab was established to aid in the learning outcomes of the basic course, with the additional goal of helping international students succeed in a course that includes difficult content for non-native students.

Since the Com Lab's inception in the spring of 2012, the number of students receiving help from the Com Lab has steadily increased. In fall of 2013, there were 265 total appointments. In comparison, in the fall of 2012, there were 117 appointments. Most of the students who completed the post-visit survey were first-time visitors (81.2%). The students receiving help from the lab were predominately freshman and major in everything from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields to English and history. Almost half (46.5%) of the students who completed the survey were international students.

Methods

In this section, we will explain the mixed-methodological approach we took to our assessment of the Com Lab and discuss the role of validity concerning qualitative data. Two primary forms of qualitative data were used in order to evaluate the Com Lab: an observational component

and 99 open-ended student responses to 165 post-visit survey that also included standard quantitative items.

Data Collection Procedures

First, the basic course leadership team observed the everyday Com Lab environment. Since its inception in 2012, the authors have regularly engaged in informal and individual observations of the Com Lab. In the role of observer, the basic course administrators would examine the activity in the Com Lab. These observations were not restricted to the Com Lab itself, but also the surrounding environment in which the Com Lab operated. The authors would then share their observations with the remainder of the basic course administrative team at regular meetings that took place on a weekly basis. The observational data supplemented our traditional survey data and informed our understanding of the Com Lab experience. It enabled us to provide background on the Com Lab, to situate our findings within the larger context of the basic course program, and to be able to provide the “thick description” that is so valuable in qualitative research (Geertz, 1994). For example, the basic course leadership team observed several interactions between students and the Com Lab assistants and noticed different interpersonal approaches in helping students. Using the survey data that indicated students found their experiences in the Com Lab beneficial, the basic course leadership team knew that the numerical data were only telling part of the Com Lab story.

Second, and as part of ongoing assessment work on the Com Lab, we created a survey that gathered basic data such as the student’s instructor, the reason for their visit (e.g., outline help, topic selection, APA formatting), and the number of times the student visited the Com Lab. This survey has been adapted over time in order to more fully report who is using the Com Lab and for what reasons. In addition to the basic information, questions that measured the level of help provided were also included: (1) “I feel more knowledgeable about course material after my visit to the Com Lab,” (2) “I plan to utilize the Com Lab again,” and (3) “I would recommend the Com Lab to my friends.” These items were ranked using a five-point Likert-type scale that ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. A link to this survey was sent via e-mail to students after their visit, and all responses were voluntary and confidential.

Response rates to this survey ranged from a low of 9.8% (fall 2013) to a high of 35.9% (fall 2012). A final report that compiled all of the responses was created at the end of each semester starting in the spring of 2012 (see Table 1 for a summary of the results to the survey items: “My visit to the Com Lab was helpful,” “I plan to utilize the Com Lab services again,” and “I would recommend the Com Lab to my friend”).

Many of the descriptive statistics from the summary table (Table 1) show that, starting with the second semester of the Com Lab’s existence, respondents are generally quite pleased with the help they receive from the Com Lab, with the median results saying students agree/strongly agree (median scores in the 4’s) with survey items such as “My visit to the Com Lab was helpful.”

However, even a few minutes reading through responses to the open-ended questions revealed the statistics were only telling part of the story. It was evident that only a partial portrayal of student experiences was captured through the quantitative reporting. As a result, the focus of this assessment was shifted to the open-ended responses, which were previously neglected. This allowed for a mixed-methods approach that incorporated qualitative methodology that better encapsulated the student experience with the Com Lab while also maintaining the reporting format prioritized by university administrators. The open-ended section of the survey included questions such as, “Please comment on anything you found to be particularly helpful about your visit to the Com Lab” and “Please comment on anything that could be improved for students who visit the Com Lab in the future.” These prompts allowed students to reflect on their own experiences.

Data Analysis Procedures

Once the responses were gathered and organized in the spring of 2014, the basic course leadership team went through an iterative process of coding in which the data were examined individually by the authors and then collaboratively as a group (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). During the initial phase, first-level codes were established using the constant-comparative method. The constant-comparative method is a systematic means of breaking down, organizing, and grouping units of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this case, the units of data were passages

of text provided by undergraduate students following their visits to the Com Lab. These initial codes tend to be descriptive in nature and focus “on ‘what’ is in the data” (Tracy, 2013, p. 202). Some of the codes, or the words and phrases used to describe the data, included “question phrasing,” “emotions,” and “logistics.”

Then the basic course leadership team met as a group to discuss the codes and shared our individual observations of the Com Lab as we engaged in the sense-making process (Chambliss, 2009). During this second stage of analysis, we problematized our interpretations and collaboratively constructed the themes that were identified within the data. In engaging in this process, we utilized a grounded approach to data analysis in which themes were allowed to emerge organically (Denzin & Giardina, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is an inductive approach to data analysis, which allows for individual cases to build into coherent categories and overarching themes (Tracy, 2013).

Validity and Qualitative Data

As Corbin and Strauss (2008) observed, “quality in qualitative research is something that we recognize when we see it; however, explaining what it is or how to achieve it is much more difficult” (p. 297). As such, validity becomes an important component of qualitative research, as it refers to the credibility of the data as well as the level of confidence that a good interpretation of the topic has been reached (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In regards to validity, Creswell (2007) forwarded several criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research that were present in our data collection and analysis procedures.

First, “prolonged engagement” in the field can be used to evaluate qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). The assumption is that spending an extended amount of time with a research topic or phenomena will result in a more nuanced understanding. Moreover, the “prolonged engagement” can lead to saturation, which refers to the point at which new information no longer adds to the researcher’s understanding and indicates that the researcher has spent sufficient amount of time in the field. We met these criteria after we spent over two and a half years informally and formally observing the Com Lab and collecting student responses

concerning their visits. Student responses and our observations became repetitive and no new themes emerged.

Another way to evaluate the quality of qualitative research is through triangulation, which “involves the comparison of two or more forms of evidence with respect to an object of research interest” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 274). This term refers to the use of different sources, methods, and investigators in the research process (Creswell, 2007, Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In fact, Leonardi, Treem, Barley, and Miller (2014) recently advocated for additional data to be collected (e.g., network analysis, interviews, work observations, and textual analysis) in standard surveys in order to increase explanatory power. In this project, we incorporated our qualitative with the existing quantitative data by approaching our assessment of the Com Lab from a mixed-methodological approach. The hope is that by using multiple forms of evidence, the researchers will find convergent and divergent evidence that supports their data and interpretations, all of which come together to enhance the confidence of the researchers’ interpretation of the topic (Creswell, 2007).

Another way to attest to the quality of qualitative research is by assessing the description of the study. Creswell (2007) explained that a “rich, thick description allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability” (p. 209). By providing a detailed account of the research, including the participants, settings, and data collections methods, readers are able to determine if the researcher’s explanation holds together or makes sense, thus increasing the credibility of the findings developed through qualitative inquiry. Again, this is not an exhaustive list of signs used to determine the quality of qualitative research, but it serves as a starting point for discussions about the incorporation of qualitative research in traditionally quantitative arenas.

Findings

Based on the observations and student responses, we identified a tension between the efficiency demonstrated through the quantitative data and the supportive interactions desired by students. With this conflict in mind, two dominant themes emerged that centered on frustration stemming from the structure of the interactions, as well as the inherent constraints of the

organization. These findings caused us to think about ways to balance the desire to help students by providing more supportive interactions during lab sessions while also managing the tensions that emerged due to the emphasis on efficiency.

Interactional Constraints

Currently, the Com Lab sets the expectation that students must come in with specific questions. This policy was established based on advice given from the University's Writing Lab, which warned us that students would come in and ask "can you look at this?" without concern for time or ownership of the material. This suggestion from the University's Writing Lab led to the implementation of this policy for the Com Lab. The rationale for this requirement was then two-fold. First, because of the desire to see as many students as possible (thus showing administrators the need for a Com Lab) and due to the limited availability of Com Lab appointments (especially during crunch times), the Com Lab assistants had to make sure that each visit was structured. In order to be efficient, each appointment was limited to 15 minutes per student. Second, it was the basic course administration's desire that students not develop the expectation that Com Lab assistants will complete work for them. In other words, we wanted the students to take the time to consider what their concern was or what content area they needed help on. It was essential to basic course administration that lab interactions maintained that balance between providing help and doing student work for the student.

With that said, the corresponding emotions experienced by the students during their Com Lab visit were inherent in this process, as a student-centered approach to learning requires that students *feel* supported in order to be able to succeed (Ellis, 1995). However, we do not problematize emotions within this study; rather, emotions are brought up by students during observations and in the open-ended responses to their Com Lab experiences. As a result, emotions become a salient piece in helping students feel empowered to succeed in the basic course.

Feeling Underserved. The interactional structure we observed and that was described in the open-ended responses seemed to create a barrier to quality for some students. This was the case even though the averages on the scale items for the prompt "My visit to the Com Lab was

helpful” ranged from 3.8-4.5. The feelings of being underserved was best articulated by students who struggled to identify a clear question to be discussed during their visit to the Com Lab as they reported feelings of frustration because of the structured interactions. One student said,

Please do not only ask the student what their problem is. Sometimes the students really don't know what their problem is. Help them find out what their problems are (the supporting point doesn't relate to the main point).

Based on this experience, it appears as though the student was uncomfortable during his or her visit to the Com Lab and possibly even felt offended by the phrasing of the question. The student reported feeling like he or she was missing out on advice or was limited in his or her interactions when restricted by the questions that he or she needed to have prepared. This quotation demonstrates the ways in which restrictive interactions can put students on the defensive as they may not know what their concern is or may not be able to articulate their questions.

In a similar vein, another student also expressed frustration regarding the overly-structured interaction. Here the student explained that the Com Lab would benefit from “better attitudes and customer service.” One way to counter these negative comments is to open the interactions to allow for more give and take with the students who visit.

In fact, students expressed their desire to have a more open dialogue with the Com Lab assistants. One student simply shared, “I wish she would have read my outline to check for content.” This student may have benefited from a less restrictive 15-minute visit, especially given that one of the goals of the Com Lab is to empower students to succeed in the basic course, and this student's response does not indicate that this student felt empowered.

One student's response specifically highlighted the conundrum of requiring specific questions to start a help session while still providing adequate support for students:

I believe instructors in the Com Lab should be able to give constructive criticism about your work without being distinctly asked a question about your work. Instructors by no means need to do your work for you, but they should be able to look over your work and tell you what you need to work on.

There has to be a way to frame this request so that students feel less discouraged, frustrated, or limited in their interactions with the Com Lab, which we saw through the preceding examples, while also ensuring that the basic course directors are satisfied with the balance of student learning versus help provided by the Com Lab assistants in completing assignments.

Feeling Rushed. In addition to the required structure of the Com Lab experience, students also reported feeling rushed in their interactions, even if they were able to choose a specific issue of focus for the appointment. This point exemplifies the tension between demonstrating efficiency (getting students in and out of the lab, thus having numbers to support continued funding of the Com Lab) and the co-construction of a supportive learning environment.

Time was an issue cited again and again in the open-ended data. For example, one student simply stated, "More time could be given to each student." While another student echoed this sentiment when he or she said "having the time for someone to listen would help me prepare." In this case, it appears as though the Com Lab fell short in the eyes of this student since he or she was not given enough time during their appointment to run through his or her upcoming presentation. In the open-ended responses, one student offered a solution to counter the feeling of being rushed to stay within the time limits. They offered, "it (the interaction) would be more beneficial if you had more staff."

Feeling Frustrated. The structure of the interactions, as well as the limitation in appointment length, prevented a student-centered approach to learning. Students reported feeling frustrated with the level of support due to these barriers of structure and time even though survey results indicated that they would visit the Com Lab again (3.95-4.54) and would recommend it to a friend (3.76-4.62). Students often used emotive language or shared feelings of frustration and discouragement in their responses.

First, there was a feeling of frustration and disappointment associated with the restrictive interactions previously discussed. For example, one student wrote, "Please do not only ask the students what their problems [are]. Sometimes students really don't know what their problems [are]. Help them to find out what their problems." Clearly, the conflicting goals of the Com Lab led to frustration and negative emotions for some students trying to receive help. Instead of contributing to a positive impression of the Com Lab and the basic course, restrictions made these students feel rushed, jilted, or as if their appointment did not make any significant improvements to their outline or speech performance. As a result, these negative emotions are worth delving into so that students feel empowered or able to succeed in the basic course.

In terms of time-related restrictions, the idea of wrapping up quickly was also discussed: "[the] meeting was rushed and the TA didn't seem to care." We noticed that in this statement, the student did not differentiate between the Com Lab assistant and the TAs that our university uses to teach the basic course, thus leading us to believe that interactions like the one discussed above make our students feel discouraged or unsupported, not just by the Com Lab, but also the basic course as a whole. In addition, the "rushed" feeling described by both students in this section may make Com Lab visitors feel like they are just a number, which can be problematic in a large university or standardized basic course. In our observations of the Com Lab, we noticed that wrapping up quickly occurred regularly. However, this oftentimes occurred during peak usage hours when the Com Lab had back-to-back appointments. This led us to theorize that interactions feel rushed, even though Com Lab assistants are merely trying to meet demand for the Com Lab.

Organizational Constraints

The open ended responses and observational data enabled the authors to see the level of uncertainty that the students are faced with when they first think about visiting the Com Lab, which is important in terms of achieving learning goals (Hunt & Simonds, 2002). Students reported poor knowledge or inconsistent messages about the Com Lab in general. In addition, the logistics of the Com Lab seemed to induce feelings of uncertainty among the students.

Com Lab Promotion. The need for additional promotion of the Com Lab was discussed by students and observed by the basic course leadership team. For example, one student said “it was hard to find the Com Lab.” The idea of organizational constraints focused on the need for more information about the help provided and ways to schedule appointments, or to describe services that are provided. One student simply stated that we need to “publicize the COM Lab a little more ... would help bring in more students.” This quotation begins to show the lack of information that surrounds the Com Lab. In addition, the uncertainty regarding the Com Lab was observed by the basic course leadership team, who witnessed numerous students getting lost in the communication department or stopping to ask graduate students and faculty for directions when trying to find the Com Lab. The front office staff also reported a large number of students asking where to locate the Com Lab. In fact, many students would walk right past the lab on their first visit. For students who sign up for only 15-minute appointments, difficulty in locating the Com Lab can cut into their time with a Com Lab assistant, especially during peak usage weeks.

One major concern was the lack of communication (and perceived knowledge) about the Com Lab. Based on the student responses, it seemed as if information about the Com Lab was not communicated to all interested parties. One student shared a brief example when he or she was looking for the Com Lab office. “Having more information about where it is located and such would be much more helpful. I had a hard time finding it and the librarians that I asked had no idea what I was talking about.” This student did not have a positive experience in terms of gaining access to information about the Com Lab. As such, it may taint his or her experience using the basic course resource.

In a similar vein, the survey included a question that asked if the student’s instructor encouraged them to visit the COM Lab, and a couple respondents strongly disagreed with this statement. This perhaps speaks to a lack of understanding or skewed perception concerning the goals of the Com Lab on the part of the basic course instructors. Without examining the open-ended responses and discovering that some students do not feel supported in venturing to the Com Lab, an important area of improvement in the basic course could be lost. Additionally, this raises the question of why students do not feel their instructor encourages them to visit the Com

Lab. Further studies could be conducted to understand instructor perceptions of the Com Lab and perhaps lead to better education of the basic course instructors concerning the Com Lab.

Com Lab Logistics. In addition, students provided suggestions to improve the logistics of the Com Lab. Students expressed a desire to have additional hours that would be more conducive to their schedule (e.g., evenings and weekends). When asked if there is anything that could be improved, one student said “a streamlined system for waiting and knowing if the Com Lab helper is available at that time or busy with someone else.” Students want to have a system where they can see appointment openings. Again, and related to Com Lab promotion, by providing more information and consistent messages, the Com Lab will be better able to reduce uncertainty associated with visiting the Com Lab, like knowing that a Com Lab assistant would be available to help them.

Students also expressed the desire for a better location, since the Com Lab is currently housed in the school of communication offices and appears to be a just another faculty or graduate student office. While completing the observational data collection, we noted that the Com Lab is located in a hallway that usually has the lights turned off, which may discourage students from visiting the Com Lab since it is down a long dark hallway. In addition, the door is often closed for either of two reasons: to allow the Com Lab assistants to work privately on their individual research or to conduct a meeting with another student. Again, this practice does not make the student feel comfortable or welcomed. In fact, it creates a cold environment that deters students from engaging with the Com Lab assistants. Com Lab assistants also reported that students seeking help from the Com Lab could be disruptive when the Com Lab was not open (e.g., students “dropping by” after 3 p.m. when the lab was closed, or if one Com Lab assistant was working and one Com Lab assistant was studying, oftentimes the assistant studying would be interrupted by students asking for last-minute help).

Once the Com Lab was found, the students reported additional logistical concerns that did not match their expectation of what the Com lab would be. The office is set up with four desks, two of which are used by the Com Lab assistants. This is fine for some basic course activities like reading through outlines or discussing topic selection, but other tasks, such as practicing speeches, are tougher since there is not a division to separate two competing

activities. One student simply said that a “bigger room” was needed. Another student further explained that the seating arrangement was poor and that the room was “tiny and compact and not too comfortable.” Unfortunately, given the space issues and financial limitations the school faces, the space may not be as inviting as we might like or fit all of the needs of the basic course. However, it is important to keep these responses from students in mind as it brings to light the emotions students feel that may contradict the desires and function of the Com Lab.

Discussion

The overarching tension and corresponding findings would not have been visible if the traditional quantitative approach to assessment had been solely used. Due to the nuanced observational data and rich student responses, we were able to uncover the hidden tension between prioritizing efficiency and providing supportive learning interactions to our students. This is an important tension to manage given the very real implications that coincide with it, such as funding decisions and decreased feelings of positivity associated with the school of communication, coloring perceptions of the major and possibly producing recruitment and retention issues.

Based on this overarching finding, we have been able to provide suggestions to continue to improve the Com Lab and reported student experiences. For example, the quantitative approach would have shown that students might not recommend the Com Lab to their friends, but would not have been able to address the “why” question. By incorporating the open responses and observational data, we found that one area of improvement in this arena is to reduce the restrictiveness (but maintain the level of structure) of the interactions by developing a more supportive and open dialogue with the student. This process will hopefully alleviate some of the negative feelings reported. In addition, we found that additional promotion of the Com Lab was needed and that logistics sometimes created a barrier to the basic course resource.

As such, this project had two primary contributions. First, it allowed us to develop practical suggestions that would improve our Com Lab specifically and provides ideas that communication labs at other institutions would want to consider. Second, it highlighted the role

of qualitative assessment work by providing data that illuminated tensions that traditional assessment data only partially showed.

Practical Suggestions

While there are many gains associated with communication labs, the benefits can only be reaped if the lab is structured and modified based on student needs. For our Com Lab, the question now becomes how do we create a more supportive Com Lab environment while still managing the tensions associated with efficiency and expected by the funding outlets?

Based on the findings, the basic course administration and Com Lab assistants can create a more supportive and encouraging environment by being cognizant of interactional constraints that make students feel “rushed,” annoyed, or like another number. Instead, the Com Lab assistants should try to promote the feelings of improved self-confidence that happen when students are empowered through positive learning experiences. We believe that this improvement lies in the phrasing of questions. Rather than greeting the student by asking what their question is, we have broadened the greeting to allow the student time to lay out their concerns while maintaining the fifteen minute time limit. We hope that by having the students articulate their questions and structure their appointments it will allow the Com Lab assistant—student interaction to develop in a more flexible manner that will encourage learning.

This suggestion corresponds to Jones et al. (2004) who noted the need for training communication lab assistants on a variety of topics above and beyond basic course content. This is somewhere our Com Lab could improve. Incorporating training on interpersonal and immediacy skills may help to relieve some of the frustration and anxiety surrounding the communication lab visit and upcoming speech. The authors also suggested all students be required to attend the communication lab in order to alleviate stress surrounding communication lab visits; however, this may not be the best suggestion for all communication labs as it would put more of a strain on the communication lab resources and further restrict student interactions. While this strategy would increase numbers, showing the need for administrative support (funding, space, graduate assistants), and may decrease anxiety that comes with visits, it would hinder productive visits by trying to manage over 3,000 mandatory

visits per semester along with the optional visits of student who want to improve specific skills. Instead, the basic course administration of the Com Lab studied for this assessment is considering developing a brief promotional video to show students the Com Lab, introduce the Com Lab assistants, and try to decrease some of the anxiety that comes with the uncertainty of visiting the Com Lab.

The creation of a more encouraging learning environment also ties to the concept of supportive communication, which has been looked at in terms of stress and health outcomes (MacGeorge, Samter, & Gillihan, 2005), at-risk students (Lippert, Titsworth, & Hunt, 2005), and GTAs and information seeking behaviors (Myers, 1998). Future research could incorporate these findings to determine how communication lab assistants phrase and structure interactions with a broad range of students. MacGeorge et al. (2005), Lippert et al. (2005), and Myers (1998) highlight the importance associated with supportive messages. This is a clear application to communication labs that can have benefits for basic course administration and student learning outcomes generally.

We have shared these findings with the basic course director and department level administrators, who have begun instituting some changes based on our analysis. One of these addresses the need for additional information through promotion of the Com Lab. In our initial report, we suggested that the basic course develop promotional materials, sell the idea to instructors, and use an established undergraduate communication club to create a PR campaign. The final suggestion is unique in the sense that it integrates students and their specific communicative interests. The basic course director has since implemented all three of these suggestions. One of the sections of the “problems in public relations” class has been “hired” by the basic course to promote the Com Lab. As part of this public relations campaign, the students conducted research in which they gauged awareness about the resource. Out of 95 respondents, 81 said that they would want to use a resource that would help them with outlines and presentations, but 88 indicated that they had not visited the Com Lab, even though roughly half of them did know that the Com Lab existed. The public relations class used this information to develop and launch a Com Lab website that is promoted through student identified mediums (e.g., Blackboard, instructors, and advisors). Toward the conclusion of the

Fall 2014 semester, visits to the Com Lab have already surpassed previous semester attendance (or, over 250 visits).

In terms of logistics, some of the concerns cannot be addressed because of monetary and space limitations. However, there are several easy changes that can be made to improve the student experience. For example, the basic course administration works with departmental secretaries to ensure that the hallway lights are turned on every day to light the way to the Com Lab. We could also increase the signage that directs students to the office that houses the Com Lab assistants, or create a video that visually shows where the Com Lab is located, introduces the Com Lab assistants, and details a standard appointment with a description of services provided. In addition, the basic course director is in the process of hiring two additional Com Lab mentors to fill in additional hours. For the Spring 2015 semester, a third Com Lab assistant will work an additional 10 hours in the Com Lab, bringing the total number of available hours for students to seek help up to 40 hours.

Future Research

In the future, we would like to collect additional qualitative data related to the immediacy skills displayed by the Com Lab assistants to integrate into this assessment project. We see this additional research happening on three levels. First, we would like to offer students the chance to engage in a focus group that would cover their experiences visiting the Com Lab. We think that this approach to collecting qualitative data would provide additional insights into their interpersonal experiences and allow students to build on one another's responses in a conversational and non-threatening setting (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Second, we plan to complete individual interviews with the Com Lab assistants in order to account for their perspective of the Com Lab interactions and experiences as well as their insight into the current procedures and possible improvements in terms of necessary training. We also hope to interview a sampling of the basic course instructors in order to explore issues related to support of the Com Lab and dissemination of information about visiting this student resource. Finally, we believe that we could gather data related to the perception of immediacy through the

quantitative post-visit survey, which would require time to develop items that would measure this inherently communicative phenomena.

In this paper, we highlighted the benefits of adding a qualitative approach to traditionally quantitative assessment work by presenting our experience evaluating and improving the Com Lab. In doing so, we uncovered a hidden tension regarding efficiency and student emotions and expectations. In addition, we showed the nuanced information and student reported feelings that emerged from the qualitative data that would not have been visible taking a solely quantitative approach to the Com Lab assessment. With that said, the addition of qualitative data into assessment work would provide insights concerning how communication labs support the goals set forth by the basic course. Basic course administrators can use this information to improve or institute communication labs that contribute to the oral communication learning outcomes. All in all, the inclusion of qualitative data into traditionally quantitative approaches to assessment will widen the scope of assessment reports delivered to the basic course constituencies. We hope to continue to explore and develop a better understanding of the information that arises from qualitative inquiry, especially when applied to issues of the basic course, resource assessments, and communication labs.

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Table 1

Summary of Com Lab Survey Responses

Semester	Total # of Survey Responses	My visit to the Com Lab was helpful.	I plan to utilize the Com Lab services again.	I would recommend the Com Lab to my friends.
S 2012	41	$M = 3.830, sd = 1.18$	$M = 4.02, sd = 1.08$	$M = 3.76, sd = 1.14$
F 2012	42	$M = 4.50, sd = 0.74$	$M = 4.54, sd = 0.80$	$M = 4.62, sd = 0.73$
S 2013	33	$M = 4.39, sd = 0.79$	$M = 4.48, sd = 0.83$	$M = 4.58, sd = 0.83$
F 2013	26	$M = 4.31, sd = 0.84$	$M = 4.31, sd = 0.68$	$M = 4.35, sd = 0.75$
S 2014	23	$M = 3.95, sd = 1.25$	$M = 3.95, sd = 1.25$	$M = 4.13, sd = .99$
Total	165	--	--	--