

Transforming Communication Centers to IDEAL spaces

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Our Communication Centers have a long and storied tradition on countless campuses as the place where communication skills are developed, presentations are created, and speech anxiety is reduced (Stewart et al, 2021, Turner & Sheckels, 2015, Yook & Sayre, 2012). Research supports they are seen as safe and supportive spaces where connections are made, confidence is built, and voices are shared (Cuny et al 2012, Carpenter & Apostel, 2012). As Communication Center professionals examine the larger societal issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access and reflect on how we can promote those ideals in our spaces, we are almost overwhelmed by the importance of the situation, the responsibility it entails, and the multitude of approaches and plans we can enact. With reflection, we know that we intentionally craft places that support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. We do that primarily to support the more visible aspects of diversity, such as race, gender, and physical disability. Of course, even then, many of these visible identifiers may be perceived inaccurately and/or paint an incomplete picture, such as a biracial student of African American and Caucasian heritage being regarded as Black, or a transgendered student being labeled as their gender assigned at birth. Despite our best intentions, more work needs to be done, and I invite us to expand our definitions of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access to include invisible challenges, such as

neurodiversity and mental health. There are many types of invisible disabilities, and I urge us to be mindful of them and especially those that influence learning and might serve as barriers to the good work we do in our centers.

A Call to Reflection

Before we can truly leverage our IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access) commitment and take it to the next level of sustained and meaningful advocacy, we must examine what we have left to do. The 2020 edition of the *Communication Center Journal* is an inspiring place to start. Co-editors Cuny and Mabrey curated an issue focused on “challenging ourselves for challenging times,” offering a call for reflection that will, ultimately, lead to thoughtful action. The issue was full of insightful, thoughtful, and provocative research and scholarship. Three pieces, in particular, connect to this essay and the continued evolution of our Communication Centers. They offer ideas for us to consider, aspirational goals for us to reach, and perspectives for us to contemplate that may (or may not) be new and/or uncomfortable. The first, by Ladva, challenged us to consider the prevalence of White Mainstream English (WME) as the standard of “good” communication on our campuses and in our centers. How can we leverage the power of diverse stories and experiences told in a variety of dialects and languages as valid and effective forms of authentic

communication? That should be part of our transformation. The second article, by Villano, showcased that our centers have been and should continue to be places that support student empowerment and agency. Think of what we can do if we open our doors even wider, make our front porch even bigger, and expand our view of authentic human communication. Finally, in a third piece, Wilkinson, reminds us of the power of language to include and empower. We can follow her lesson and intentionally craft messages that leverage IDEA principles, foster, and promote belonging and celebrate our safe and supportive spaces for all voices, stories, and experiences. In this essay, I focus on diversity as invisible disability, particularly neurodiversity.

Exploring Invisible Disabilities

First, let us explore a broader sense of IDEA challenges by examining invisible disabilities and the ways we can support the success of those students who experience them.

According to the Invisible Disabilities Association (2021),

an invisible disability is a physical, mental or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person's movements, senses, or activities. Unfortunately, the very fact that these symptoms are invisible can lead to misunderstandings, false perceptions, and judgments (paras. 2).

The association further offers this representative list of symptoms and conditions: "The term [*invisible disability*] refers to symptoms such as debilitating pain, fatigue, dizziness, cognitive dysfunctions, brain injuries, learning differences and mental health disorders, as well as hearing and vision

impairments.." Oslund (2014) provides examples of learning differences and mental health conditions, including autism, ADHD, anxiety, processing challenges, and affective mood disorders. According to Armstrong (2015), the idea of a "normal" brain is a myth. Morin (2021) explains that "Neurodiversity is a viewpoint that brain differences are normal, rather than deficits. Neurodiverse people experience, interact with, and interpret the world in unique ways."

Further, neurodiversity can be beneficial for children when they are exposed to learning and thinking differences (Understood, 2021). As we know, when these kids grow into young adults, they come to our campuses, which may or may not be able to offer the full support they need. That is where our Communication Centers can step in and step up. By discussing and exploring the concept of neurodiversity, we "can help reduce stigma around learning and thinking differences." (Morin, 2021). This is closely related to how Communication Centers can move away from a "one size fits all" approach to presentations and effective communication by embracing differences based upon gender, culture, disabilities, neurodiversity and more. We can advocate for, celebrate, and leverage the power of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access efforts.

Invisible Disabilities and Communication Centers

I suspect as we read Oslund's (2014) examples of neurodiversity, we reflected on many of our students who have self-reported experiencing these challenges in the classroom where their invisible disability was not understood and countless more who live with these disabilities silently. We also have probably seen the number of students

working with our campus disability offices and self-reporting anxiety and other mental health issues grow over the past few years (Spectra, 2020). Certainly, with the current pandemic, mental health stressors have greatly increased (Garland & Violanti, 2021). We are all familiar with the range of anxiety caused by public speaking and formal presentation opportunities, progressing from minimally stressful to completely debilitating. More importantly, we are skilled in helping those who visit our centers to address public speaking anxiety (Stewart et al, 2021). How many more can we reach, though? How many more might come to seek our help if we focused more on the prevalence of these invisible disabilities? How many more may feel empowered? By transforming our communication centers into places that leverage the power of IDEA efforts, we can focus on belonging and can reach even more students and do more good work in our centers, on our campuses, and within our communities.

After we broaden our vision of IDEA, we can then focus on the connection between Communication Center scholarship and belonging and how we craft those safe and supportive places. According to therapist Dr. Karyn Hall, “belonging means acceptance as a member or part” (Hall, 2014, para 1.). This definition fits what we have always done with our student clients as we help them navigate their coursework, address their speech anxiety, and find their voice in a safe and supportive communal space (Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2012). It also applies to the benefits to our student consultants, the “secret ingredient” in the recipe of success for our centers (Palmerton, 2015). These student consultants maintain the integrity of our spaces, including by

focusing on cultural relativism on a peer level (McBride, 2018) and through their work and dedication developing active listening, empathy, flexibility, and coaching skills while providing feedback and evaluation and engaging in conversations, even sometimes difficult ones (Ray, 2018, Atkins-Sayre & Yook, 2015, Gill, 2015, Wilson, 2012). Then, of course, there is the shared value of any engagement with our Communication Centers through intentional co-creation of “safe and brave spaces” that support struggle leading to empowerment (Tonkins, 2018) and engaged programming, such as facilitating the SOFTEN approach (Cuny et al, 2012). Based on her practice, Dr. Hall (2014) offers three tips to foster a sense of belonging: find similarities, accept (and celebrate) others, and be open to new opportunities. Historically, we have done these in our Centers and can continue to do so in even more intentional and empowering ways.

Leveraging our Work

How can we best leverage a commitment to IDEA values to impact student success and empowerment? Though some of us may not be that familiar with the concepts of neurodiversity or invisible disabilities, most of us have been helping students manage an invisible disability for quite some time. In fact, speech anxiety is probably one of the more common manifestations and one most of us have experience with (Dwyer, 2015). As we know, one of the simplest things we can do to help our speech anxious students effectively manage their speech anxiety and feel empowered is to address this challenge with empathy, intentionality, and purpose. The truth is, everyone gets nervous at some point, whether speaking up in class, delivering a

presentation or during a job interview. For some reason, there is a common misconception that only some people get nervous (Prentiss & Violanti, 2019). Then our speech anxious students feel an additional burden of “well what is wrong with me, why am I the only one?” It is important that we continually stress how natural speech anxiety is and that we all experience it at some level. When we consult with students in our spaces, make presentations across campus, and facilitate workshops, let us share what we know about speech anxiety and how common, debilitating (for some), and how manageable it can be (Turner & Scheckles, Dwyer, 2015).

Our Communication Centers provide insight, offer practice opportunities, and support student success. Now, more than ever, with all the anxiety, worry and fear caused by this pandemic, social injustice and a struggling economy, our students need our support to process their feelings in healthy, positive, and effective ways, especially our students with invisible disabilities. While Communication Centers staff cannot play the role of therapist, we can reduce student stress levels by lowering speech anxiety and empowering students by intentionally connecting speech anxiety to IDEA and leveraging that power.

Crafting IDEAL spaces

Our experiences, as well as our Communication Center scholarship, recognize that Communication Centers serve important roles in supporting student success, agency, and advocacy (Cuny, et al, 2104). We can leverage our strong reputations for good work to empower students who may have not felt included in our past efforts. We can do this in three intentional ways: 1) harness the power of storytelling, 2)

adopt a cultural relevant approach, and 3) embrace a growth mindset.

Storytelling is the oldest form of human communication, dating back to cave drawings and has existed across every culture and civilization in human history. Though our students may not be that experienced with formal speeches, they all are familiar with storytelling as an effective way to build connection, share information, and positively impact others. When we frame presentations as stories, we empower our students to connect and share their ideas in more authentic ways. We also may connect more with their cultural heritage.

Cultural relevant pedagogy is an approach that harnesses “students’ culture as a vehicle for learning,” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161). This framework sees culture as an authentic and important part of the student experience and intentionally connects that to their learning. According to Ladson-Billings, there are three components to her approach: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Through intentional discussions with students, actively listening to their concerns and aspirations, and with an awareness of our own experiences and culture, we can heed the call presented by Ladva (2021). We can step away from the traditional reliance on White Mainstream English (WME) as the standard for a “good” speech and embrace a more thoughtful, nuanced and wholistic approach to effective communication utilizing the cultural relevant framework.

Taking that step may be hard for some within our communication discipline as well as for some of our colleagues across disciplines who may have a more narrow, WME standard for

presentations. We need to develop what Stanford Professor Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset,” the ability to learn through our experiences (Davis, 2019). A growth mindset, as opposed to a fixed one, enables us to look at change in more favorable ways and see opportunities, not just obstacles. Embracing and applying some of the principles of a growth mindset will empower us to strengthen our Communication Centers as IDEA spaces and to leverage our good work to help even more students. There are many lists of ways to cultivate a growth mindset and these three suggestions seem to be most appropriate for us (Davis, 2019). First, we can be brave in the face of challenges. Second, we can take a deeper dive into authenticity. Third, we can cultivate a sense of purpose. We can adopt a growth mindset to continue to expand, transform, and elevate our Communication Centers to empower and advocate for more of our students

Conclusion

In closing, our Communication Centers do a lot of good for our students, our campuses, and our communities. Advocating for our students and IDEA principles is wonderful and, as we have seen during the pandemic and in the work highlighted in the 2020 Communication Center Journal, there is still much work to be done. We should move beyond ADA compliance (Marco, 2021) and engage in the active leveraging of power to empower. I invite all of us associated with Communication Centers to transform our centers into IDEAL spaces by leveraging the work we can and will continue to do. We can craft spaces of support where all students experience a sense of belonging because their voice is heard,

their story valued, and their truth lived. It is an IDEAL we can strive for.

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