Speaking of Disruption: Experiences of Speech Faculty in Transitioning Face-to-Face Courses to Remote Instruction

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Speaking of Disruption: Experiences of Speech Faculty in Transitioning Face-to-Face Courses to Remote Instruction

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Online learning is not new to higher education, but the rapid transition from face-to-face instruction to virtual course delivery in the middle of an academic term due to the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the need for better training and preparation (Mseleku, 2020). This qualitative study explored the experiences of speech and communication faculty members (N = 5) who were required to swiftly transition to online teaching with short notice. Based on faculty perspectives, findings reveal the need for recognizing different pedagogical approaches to distance education, the need for more faculty training to teach online, the need for engagement and interaction with students online, and the need for peer mentoring among faculty for optimal professional development.

*Keywords*: Distance Learning, Virtual Learning, Online Pedagogy, Online Speech Courses, Speech Communication, Communication Ecology Theory

**Introduction**

During the Spring 2020 semester, colleges and universities across the country grappled with transitioning face-to-face and hybrid courses to an online modality due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Bryson & Andres, 2020). As students, faculty, staff, and administration struggled with new social distancing mandates from state and federal officials, it soon became clear that the remainder of the spring semester would consist of quickly transitioning courses to remote learning, heavily utilizing online learning management systems (Mseleku, 2020).

Though the effect of COVID-19 was felt across all disciplines in higher education, it prompted unique challenges to courses that typically rely heavily on in-class interactions (Power, 2020). Speech communication courses, such as public speaking and business and professional speaking, require an interactive element when students deliver speech assignments to an audience of classmates and the professor. While speech courses are successfully taught online, these sections are usually assigned to instructors who are trained in pedagogy when teaching this subject in a virtual environment. The problem is speech faculty who only taught courses face-to-face had to rapidly transition face-to-face and hybrid courses into distance learning classes with little time for advanced training. Additionally, students who purposefully registered for a face-to-face or hybrid section of speech were expected to finish courses online.
Literature Review

The extant body of knowledge affirms the experience of faculty, thereby adding a level of trustworthiness to the emerging themes and recommendations for best-practice approaches regarding the development of procedures to prepare for future rapid transitions of teaching modalities from face-to-face to online. The succinct review of literature underpinning this study presents the historical foundations of online versus traditional course delivery in speech communication, online speech faculty perspectives, as well as a theoretical framework that may reveal better understanding of the faculty experience.

Online Versus Traditional Course Delivery

Studies regarding online public speaking courses at the college level examine various aspects of online courses compared to face-to-face versions of the course. Students perceived no significant difference of public speaking abilities and communication apprehension in online public speaking courses compared to traditional, face-to-face public speaking courses (Clark & Jones, 2001). Online speech courses are comparable to face-to-face versions in terms of skills, knowledge acquisition, course work, and academic rigor (Bornak, & Roades, n.d.; Corum, 2013; Dahl, 2012; Linardopoulos, 2010; Schollenberger et al., n.d.). Evidence indicated that online public speaking students learn more than face-to-face students regarding technical or digital communication (Dahl, 2012; Kirkwood, Gutgold, & Manley, 2011; Schollenberger et al., n.d.). Additionally, students in many online speech courses bear the responsibility of gathering live audiences for speech assignments and recording presentations. However, the requirement of gathering a live audience for speech assignments significantly influenced retention in an online public speaking course; the main factor negatively affecting a student’s ability to gather a live audience for speech assignments was student procrastination.

Research investigating faculty and online speech courses found a lingering resistance by some communication faculty to transition public speaking courses to an online format (Allen, 2006; Gerson, 2000; Grosse, 2004; Helvie-Mason, 2010; Hunt, 2012). Reasons cited for this resistance included instructors finding value in providing immediate feedback to student speakers, creating a learning environment of demonstration for a skills-building course, and providing a live audience of classroom students to mimic traditional speaker-audience interaction (Helvie-Mason, 2010; Nicosia, 2005, Vanhorn, Person, & Child, 2008). Faculty who taught online speech courses faced challenges similar to those faced by online instructors in other disciplines. Common challenges included time management, lack of faculty training, difficulty finding a place as instructor, student motivation, workload, lack of choice to teach online, technology challenges, and the work of transforming the face-to-face class to the online format. Additionally, online instructors encountered difficulties providing feedback to students, support challenges, lack of motivation, and privacy concerns of students (Helvie-Mason, 2010; Kirkwood, Gutgold, & Manley, 2011; Linardopoulos, 2010; Nicosia, 2005; Pearson & Van Horn, 2006; Van Horn, Pearson, & Child, 2008). With regard to course content and delivery of course content, online speech instructors should plan differently than face-to-face instructors by altering expectations of time management, training, preparation, course involvement, and student interactions (Tomlin, 2012; Kirkwood, Gutgold, & Manley, 2011; Hart, 2014).
Faculty Perspectives of Teaching Speech Online

With regard to the perspectives of speech faculty about online teaching experiences, Lora Helvie-Mason (2010) reflected on the transition experienced when speech courses were moved online after students were forced to move away from campus due to Hurricane Katrina. Helvie-Mason detailed the struggle preserving instructional identity as an online public speaking instructor and advised online speech faculty to maintain oneself, stay connected, and be creative (Helvie-Mason, 2010). Ratcliff (2017) elaborated, “the search into a more holistic view of the online speech faculty experience . . . includes a new perspective, the student view.”

The online medium influences faculty perceptions of themselves as audience members of student speakers, of levels of control over speech environments, and of faculty views of public speaking assignments as digital oratory. Additionally, student perspectives of online speech courses include discussions on the anxiety associated with presenting in front of a camera, the importance of a live audience requirement as a means to improve speaking skills, and the reduction of communication apprehension as it relates to delivering speeches (Ratcliff, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Communication Ecology Theory (CET) provides a way to examine the challenges face-to-face faculty experience when rapidly transitioning speech courses to an online format. In the midst of drastic and rapid changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in information technology and communication, few routine activities remain unaffected. Altheide (1995) posited that the ecology of communication is intended to aid in understanding the organization of social activities and the implications for social order.

Specifically, the goal of CET is to “become more aware of the interaction between information technology, communication formats, and social activities in order to recognize significant social processes that are changing our lives” (Altheide, 1995, p. 13). An extended view of communicative ecology includes “the context in which the communication process occurs” (Foth & Hearn, 2007, p. 756). Foth and Hearn proposed three layers by which to investigate the complexity of ecology research: a technological layer, a discursive (content) layer, and a social layer.

The technological layer describes “communication media and technologies used for interaction, covering traditional media such as telephone networks and face-to-face modes and also new media such as instant messaging and social networking” (Davison et al., 2014, p. 2036). The discursive layer is composed of content that “involves an idea or conversational theme” (Seol et al., 2016, p. 7). The social layer is composed of the interaction or communication among people. Interaction that is changed significantly or a new activity that is created through the interactive process involving technology and content is partially controlled by those technological formats (Altheide, 1994, p. 668). The issue, then, is the locus of control and influence. The application of technology in an organizational context can employ “ways of seeing” (Altheide, 1994, p. 670). Ratcliff (2017) found that CET allows investigation of the
temporal and experiential connection between online speech students and online audience members. “The interactive activities of public speaking are delayed by the technological layer of an online speech course leading to a different experience and new conceptions of public speaking” (Ratcliff, 2017, p. 177). Communicative ecology offers insight into the faculty experience of teaching speech courses online.

CET provides a way to make sense of the delicate balance that online speech faculty held between traditional expectations of public speaking and the constraints and opportunities of the online medium; therefore, it provided a framework through which to view the influence of the technological layer’s control over the discursive and interaction layers of this type of speech course (Ratcliff, 2017, p. 177). CET enabled a view of the experience of online speech faculty and students. Therefore, it could also provide a lens to examine the rapid transition to online teaching by traditionally face-to-face speech faculty.

**Methodology**

The rapid transition of modalities in a single semester provided a unique opportunity to investigate the differences between face-to-face and online speech courses with faculty and students who experienced both modalities in the same semester and course. This qualitative study utilized critical reflection methodology to explore two overarching research questions:

RQ1: What were the major challenges for face-to-face faculty in transitioning speech courses online during the COVID-19 outbreak?

RQ2: In what ways did the rapid online transition influence teaching and learning?

Fook (2011) explained that critical reflection is learning from a reworking of experience to improve professional practice. Three important strengths of critical reflection as a research method include the following:

1. Expression (ability to capture deeper and more complex aspects of circumstance)

2. Improvement (ability to receive candid information based on personal experience)

3. Theory to practice (ability to operationalize strategies for improvement based on feedback)

Further, critical reflection allows the researcher to examine nuances of a phenomenon. The aforementioned research questions are supported by an interview protocol that included open-ended, semi-structured prompts to derive information. Focusing on the dispositions of faculty members offered unique insights into a larger problem facing the entire field of higher education. Patton (2017) posited that qualitative research design provides avenues for exploration of experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about shared experiences. Understanding the faculty members’ perspectives exposes meaningful information to improve the preparation, training, and ultimately, quality of instruction. The following four steps summarize the
methodological approach underpinning this study.

Step 1: Outline the overarching research question.
Step 2: Review existing literature.
Step 3: Collect and analyze reflection narratives.
Step 4: Appraise the results and develop findings.

Sample Population and Setting

Participants in this study (N = 5) self-identified demographic information. Parameters for inclusion relied on traditional face-to-face speech faculty who were required to shift their public speaking courses to online modalities during the Spring 2020 semester as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was conducted at one two-year institution that serves approximately 12,000 students in Texas, United States. The content area specific to this inquiry examined a speech communication department and instructors moving face-to-face courses online with little notice during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Degree level</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heidi</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Ethics and Confidentiality

The participants in this study are protected by pseudonyms and omission of any information that may jeopardize the anonymity of any specific institution or individual. Ethical considerations and confidentiality are vital to the research process, and this study followed best practices in the development of this manuscript. Participants volunteered to engage in audio-recorded critical reflections that were saved on a password-protected device and deleted following the transcription and analysis of the data. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the respective institution and followed all guidelines.
Findings from Reflective Narratives

The widespread disruption of COVID-19 upended instruction, forcing many instructors to rapidly transition to remote learning. Candid reflections from faculty members derived from one-on-one interviews provide important information represented in thematic codes from analysis. Analysis of data supports the following four emergent themes: (a) the need for pedagogical understanding in distance learning, (b) the need for increased faculty training to teach online, (c) the need for engagement and interaction with students in online classes, and (d) the need for peer mentoring among faculty for optimal professional development.

Theme 1: The Need for Pedagogical Understanding in Distance Learning

Faculty members with little or no prior experience teaching online may not be aware of pedagogical differences between face-to-face instruction and virtual teaching. Pedagogical differences highlighted two factors; the level of competency the faculty member has with the Learning Management System (LMS), and the difference in teaching students remotely versus in class. All faculty participants were trained in utilizing the LMS for face-to-face courses. For example, faculty were required to use the LMS to post student grades. Beyond that, most faculty participants also utilized the LMS before the transition to online teaching by posting announcements, exchanging messages with students, and sharing resources with students. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic prompted all courses to move online, faculty were faced with challenges in conducting classes with only the LMS. In short, the LMS replaced the in-person classroom and the faculty felt a loss of control over the course.

In response to a question about the transition to online teaching, Susan reported “faculty [who had not taught online before] were intimidated by all the unknowns of teaching online and the LMS if they weren’t as familiar with the platform.” In response to the same question, Albert believed that “faculty felt like they let their students down, especially if most of the speech assignments for the class occurred during the online portion because of the instructional ability.” Heidi exclaimed, “I can’t believe how different it is to teach online!” Faculty could easily utilize the LMS features with which they were familiar before the transition online, but the asynchronous nature of the online course made it more difficult to check for student understanding, explain course content and assignments, and answer student questions. All five participants lamented the difference in using the LMS to supplement face-to-face teaching and using the LMS as the “classroom” for an online course. CET provides a possible explanation for this phenomenon. As the technological layer of the speech course changed when the students and instructor could no longer meet in person, the focus of the course shifted from the course content to the LMS platform. Because the technology drastically shifted and increased, the discursive and social aspects of the course shifted as well, in that faculty were focusing on how to communicate course content to students.
Additionally, faculty struggled with delivering instruction. In a face-to-face setting, speech faculty demonstrate effective communication skills during instruction. As the faculty transitioned to the online modality, methods were sought to compensate for the lack of classroom interaction with students earlier in the semester. For example, one faculty participant recorded normal classroom lectures on video to post in the online course. “But I don’t know that they were watching the videos. I was just feeling like I didn’t measure up…That was tough. That’s a pride thing…but I also wanted the best for them.” The lack of interaction with students altered the effectiveness of the traditional lecture. Additionally, faculty could not determine levels of student learning. Participants realized technology influences social interaction with students. Teaching online using the same methods as teaching face-to-face is not effective. Faculty and students need to be trained to think differently about course content delivered online.

**Theme 2: The Need for Increased Faculty Training to Teach Online**

Participants suggested that more faculty training would aid in delivering instruction online and making rapid changes in the future if necessary. Power (2020) explains that the nuances of teaching online versus face-to-face are significant. All participants felt that faculty competency with the LMS had a direct influence on student learning. Specifically, faculty observed that students were more likely to successfully complete the course if the instructor demonstrated competency utilizing the LMS to facilitate the course once it moved online. Other factors also influenced whether a student completed the course including student access to technology, student knowledge of the LMS, and fear and stress caused by the pandemic. From the faculty perspective, training to teach online became an obvious and immediate need once the courses had to be taught remotely. Additionally, participants desired future training in the LMS and online pedagogy, though not all plan to teach online in the future unless necessary. Paula concluded that “most faculty felt [that] with more coaching, they could become online teachers if needed and do it better.” Four of the five interviewees made similar recommendations and spoke about specific issues; Albert noticed “those that extensively utilized the LMS before the transition to online had little adjustment or problems. Because their students were already utilizing the LMS too, they also had little issues with the adjustment to fully online. [The] biggest challenge was providing detail on how students were to record and submit speech assignments.” Lisa concurred that “faculty competency with the LMS greatly affects instructional ability. Faculty competency with the LMS also affects student learning and the student experience.” Faculty who were competent with the LMS before the pandemic were able to adeptly navigate the challenge of instructing students on how to utilize other technological aspects of the course such as recording and uploading their speech presentations. Participants agreed that effective training is needed to increase faculty competency with the LMS and online pedagogy.
Theme 3: The Need for Engagement and Interaction with Students in Online Classes

The third theme arising from the one-on-one, in-depth interviews with faculty focuses on students. Participants spoke about the need for improved technical support for students. Lisa noted “faculty struggled with maintaining immediacy, letting their personality or ‘personableness’ show through in the online format. Interacting with students and making them feel special was lost. Few faculty attempted to connect with classes via Zoom due to intimidation of that new platform as well.” Students struggled with completing speech assignments once the course moved online. Video requirements for recording speeches were new additions and speaker/audience engagement was altered. Albert described how feedback was affected by moving the course online:

Faculty struggled with giving feedback. They could no longer give immediate feedback or coaching to students during or directly after their speeches. This was frustrating. Also, the drag of giving the same feedback over and over again was tiring. Also, faculty missed the opportunity of other students learning from the professor’s feedback to a speaker.

One faculty participant, Heidi, did choose to utilize Zoom meetings once courses moved to remote learning. Faculty familiar with Zoom, felt comfortable utilizing video conferences for class meetings and giving student feedback via this platform. “So, they were getting that feedback from me all around, but they were getting it face to face. They were getting a visual. They were getting it on video. They weren’t getting it in an email, which made a huge difference.” Heidi elaborated, “We can’t get our message out as effectively if we don’t know how to connect with them [online].” This theme emphasizes the high level of influence disruptive technology can have on interactions among people. Through the lens of CET, the disruption was so great in some instances that faculty attempts to communicate with students via written feedback or asynchronous video feedback in the LMS failed. However, when faculty engaged in synchronous online communication the disruption lessened to the point that it was almost non-existent. Training students to access faculty feedback or utilizing synchronous methods of communication may be a few ways to increase faculty and student interactions in online courses.

Theme 4: The Need for Peer Mentoring Among Faculty for Optimal Professional Development

Speaking about the institution’s response to the transition to remote learning, Heidi revealed “all faculty participants had a faculty mentor assigned to them, which was greatly appreciated. Phrases like, ‘if I didn’t have a faculty mentor, I would have freaked out,’ were common.” Mentors included Distance Education staff and online instructors from the same communication department as the participants. Albert declared, “I would have been lost without the mentor faculty member,” and Paula expressed “the mentoring support was a lifesaver
because it would have been next to impossible to make it work.” Faculty mentors were a short-term solution to aid participants in their rapid transition to a fully online class. Mentors aided in designing online modules for course content, clarifying pedagogical differences between online and face-to-face modalities, and answering questions during the weeks the courses were online.

As the context in which the communication process shifted for face-to-face speech courses, the use of faculty mentors attempted to reduce the disruptions to the discursive and social aspects of the course. Specifically, faculty participants were offered immediate support and training with the goal of finishing the course in a new modality.

**Conclusions and Implications for Future Research**

Bridging theory and practice to improve teaching is essential for student success. Rapid advances in technology continue to impact teaching and learning, but practical approaches to improving the process in concert with research can improve the quality of changes. Voices of faculty members add to the body of knowledge through lived experience. Altheide (1995) posited the goal of communication ecology theory is to increase awareness of the interaction between technology, communication formats, and social activities in order to recognize social processes that are changing. CET reveals changes experienced by speech faculty who traditionally teach face-to-face and were required to rapidly transition to online course formats in Spring 2020. This study introduces a new context by which to view online speech courses as the focus centered on the unique experience of rapid transition to a new teaching modality. CET proved useful in revealing the new ways of seeing public speaking by faculty who teach online (Ratcliff, 2017). Online faculty have the benefit of receiving technological and pedagogical training before entering the world of online teaching; however, the faculty participants of this study had no such luxury. Faculty mentors aided participants in navigating this new territory.

Foth and Hearn’s (2007) three layers by which to investigate the complexity of ecology research proved useful as a tool to examine a rapid increase in the use of technology. The quick transition to online teaching and learning platforms during the spring semester of 2020 added a technological layer to participants’ courses as the LMS replaced the traditional face-to-face classroom. This new mode of interaction drastically influenced the discursive and social aspects of the courses on two fronts: the general teaching of the course content and faculty interaction with students.

This study reveals the usefulness of CET as a promising lens to guide course development and redesign in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and meets the challenges that are inherent in a more technologically advanced society. Changes in higher education including increasing delivery of courses by distance learning exist as a new opportunity for innovation and creativity. In fact, the intersection between technology and communication results in a need for teaching about effective communication mediated by technology. The new
normal for conferences, meetings and daily work communication includes platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other proprietary software for video conferencing. The integration of videoconferencing platforms with Learning Management Systems (LMS) for instruction is not new but is more prevalent than ever before, meaning faculty and students alike need support to successfully navigate the virtual classroom. Allowing technology to enhance student and faculty success and moving away from disruption is a critical paradigm shift and competency.

Additionally, this research reveals the utility of CET as a means to observe a rapidly changing technological environment. As established earlier, Foth and Hearn (2007) extended the view of CET to include “the context in which the communication process occurs” (p. 756). This study is the first scholarly work to examine CET with an added temporal element, a rapid transition of two weeks to a new communication environment. This study reveals that CET still functions effectively when used as a framework to examine a swift and unexpected transition to new technology.

Faculty participants of this study returned to in-person teaching during Fall 2020, but implications for speech faculty moving forward should be noted if a transition to remote learning occurs again. First, face-to-face instructors now have a better understanding of competency in teaching online. Alternative plans to quickly change modalities should be developed in case another situation warrants remote learning. Speech faculty should also study pedagogical differences between in-person and online teaching as it relates to subject matter.

This study could also prompt reflection in faculty who teach in other disciplines. The following practical strategies may prepare institutions for future circumstances requiring the migration of courses to remote teaching and learning:

1. Develop policies that enhance faculty preparation for online teaching through peer mentoring.
2. Supplement all courses with full utilization of the LMS as a required instructional element to add a level of faculty resilience.
3. Prepare faculty members with research-based strategies to engage and interact with students in the virtual learning environment.

The spring semester of 2020 prompted an unprecedented shift for traditional face-to-face speech faculty to transition courses midterm to online modalities. Though this phenomenon of starting with one modality and finishing with another may not reoccur, it provides a unique opportunity to examine the experiences of faculty whose courses were taught both face-to-face and online within the same semester. The transition reveals the disruptive nature of the necessary adoption of the online medium on the discursive and social features of speech courses.

Future research should explore the utility of informal peer-mentoring programs among faculty members as a form of professional development. Additional research should be expanded to inspect the phenomenon surrounding the rapid transition to remote learning across
other disciplines to understand any different challenges or opportunities based on the subject. Subsequently, the sample should be expanded to include perspectives of faculty members from various backgrounds and academic disciplines.

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