

Speech Anxiety in Higher Education Students-Retention of an Ancestral Trait: A Study into the Students' Perspective of Communication Anxiety with Suggestions on How to Minimise Student Distress

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Abstract : Speech anxiety is thought to be deep-seated within the human evolutionary lineage. As a result, almost all people display high levels of anxiety when asked to communicate in front of an audience. However, proficiency in oral communication is considered as an essential skill for a graduate career and significant emphasis is placed on developing these skills in many degree programs. Because of this, many degree schemes incorporate some form of assessed dialogic presentation. Yet, a student's anxiety over public speaking, especially if severe, can be so great that at worst it can cause the student to withdraw from their study. This study investigated how students perceive their own levels of anxiety when faced with public speaking using the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) questionnaire developed by McCroskey. Additionally, students were asked to provide examples of adjustments that could be implemented that they felt would alleviate some/all of their anxiety. The results of the study indicated that the majority of the students experienced a moderate level of anxiety. However, further analysis showed that of those who were in the moderate anxiety' group, 43% fell into the higher range suggesting that overall more students experience higher levels of anxiety when faced with public speaking than maybe first envisaged. Thus, it is essential that steps are taken to address student anxiety in order that students engage with presentations, are motivated and encouraged and do not avoid such assignments. The feedback from our students indicated a need to implement systematic desensitization programs where students learn to overcome their anxiety through a series of sessions that gradually increase their anxiety levels. Furthermore, these sessions should be run in parallel with skills sessions in order for students to be better prepared and allow self-reflection and self-analysis. This study highlights the paucity of these sessions on many degree schemes and suggests that they should form an integral part of a students' early academic learning.

Keywords : student anxiety, communication anxiety, public speaking, higher education, desensitisation

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