

Critical perspectives on group consultations at communication centers: Communication accommodation theory, immediacy, and persuasion

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Abstract:

Communication centers provide assistance in the effort to enhance students' speaking skills and they have been shown to be very effective as a resource and support across numerous campuses. The central purpose for any communication center continues to include "tutoring for students preparing oral presentations or for participation in group activities, interviews, discussions, or debates" (Hobgood, Sandin, Von Till, Preston, Burk, Neher, Wanca-Thibault, 2001, p. 3). Research has shown that centers successfully help students gain competence as well as reduce public speaking anxiety (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Hunt & Simonds, 2002). In order for communication centers to be successful, peer educators need to be able to effectively communicate with students regarding strength as well as areas that need improvement. Students' perceptions of their peer educator can have a profound influence on student learning as well as how the students communicate with the peer educator.

Keywords: communication centers | speaking skills | peer educators | Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

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*****Note: Full text of article below**

Critical Perspectives on Group Consultations at Communication Centers: Communication Accommodation Theory, Immediacy, and Persuasion

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Communication centers provide assistance in the effort to enhance students' speaking skills and they have been shown to be very effective as a resource and support across numerous campuses. The central purpose for any communication center continues to include "tutoring for students preparing oral presentations or for participation in group activities, interviews, discussions, or debates" (Hobgood, Sandin, Von Till, Preston, Burk, Neher, Wanca-Thibault, 2001, p. 3). Research has shown that centers successfully help students gain competence as well as reduce public speaking anxiety (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Hunt & Simonds, 2002). In order for communication centers to be successful, peer educators need to be able to effectively communicate with students regarding strength as well as areas that need improvement. Students' perceptions of their peer educator can have a profound influence on student learning as well as how the students communicate with the peer educator.

Group consultations at communication centers, where peer

educators (also known as peer tutors, peer consultants, and peer coaches) are outnumbered by the speakers they support, combine an assortment of personas, talents, and motivations. Many students seek out this type of consultation support as a result of faculty members communicating value for doing so (King & Atkins-Sayre, 2012). This value is communicated by way of extra credit or a required part of a bigger assignment. Communication centers are sites for critical intervention (Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2012) and peer educators need to be able to communicate effectively during consultations (Turner & Sheckels, 2015), adapting to a variety of different student personalities and needs. It makes sense that research has found communication central to the peer tutoring process (Atkins-Sayre & Yook, 2015). Effective communicators adjust their style and communication content to suit their goals in a given context (Pitts & Harwood, 2015) and thus, we argue peer educators in communication centers need a better understanding of the theoretical framework addressing the phenomenon of communication adjustment and the motivations behind people's communicative acts in order to accomplish one's goals of helping others become better speakers. Peer educators must not only understand but also be able to apply the critical perspectives of communication accommodation theory, immediacy, and persuasion if they are to facilitate a more effective and efficient group consultation.

First, a peer educator must recognize that people communicate from a position they deem advantageous for their situation. As a result, a peer educator should be familiar with a standard communicative framework that best prepares them to work with speakers. The following suggests that Speech Accommodation

Theory (SAT), later renamed Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), is one such normative framework that will allow a peer educator to better manage all communicative scenarios during a group consultation. Within this framework, the peer educator must understand three specific concepts: convergence, divergence, and maintenance.

Second, a peer educator must understand how the theoretical framework (i.e. CAT) manifests in immediate behaviors. We define immediate behaviors as both the verbal and nonverbal communicative actions that motivate people to participate, and encourage connection and a sense of belonging. Immediacy for the peer educator is directly connected to the establishment of trust, friendliness, approachability, and credibility. Nonverbal immediacy behaviors include smiling, nodding, eye contact, walking closer to the audience, leaning forward, vocal expressiveness, and open posture. Verbal immediacy behaviors include addressing a person by name, previewing and reviewing, framing statements from the perspective of the person talking (for example, as a listener I found myself wondering if the thesis is supported properly in your main points). The peer educator's need to work within the speakers' preferred framework demands employment of certain verbal and nonverbal immediate behaviors.

Third, the peer educator must apply these immediate behaviors as persuasive elements to establish a relationship with their speakers. At the start of a session, if the peer educator wanted to use a person's name they might say, "so, Jamie, what are you working on?" T. L. Williams (personal communication, November 4, 2016), a graduate consultant with over 7 years of experience

finds use of proximity persuasively powerful at the start of a consultation. As each speaker is different, Williams respects their individual personal space while seeking to sit as close to them as their comfort will allow. Immediacy behaviors as persuasive elements lets the peer educator more easily enter into meaningful dialogue with the speakers, and increases the chances that feedback provided will later be applied. The peer educator must therefore grasp the interdependence of immediate behaviors and persuasion.

To facilitate a successful group consultation, peer educators must take these three critical perspectives into account (i.e., communication accommodation theory, immediacy, persuasion) and we contend that much can be gained by bringing these areas of research and theory to the communication center context. We begin with a review of each, and follow by looking at how they can be used in each stage of a group consultation. CAT describes variant categories and strategies employed by people during a communicative interaction, enabling the peer educator to see when and where immediate and persuasive behaviors are used. Thus, a basic understanding of CAT is crucial for the communication center peer educator facing group consultations.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)

Important communicative respect and/or communicative avoidance occur when peer educators interact with students in group consultations, and this can be understood from a communication accommodation theory perspective (CAT; Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991). CAT investigates the ways in which individuals vary their communication to accommodate others

given where they believe others to be, their motivations for so doing, and the social consequences arising.

CAT was developed from Giles' 1973 Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT). Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson (1987) introduced CAT to widen its application beyond speech to nonverbal communication and to highlight the value of the cognitive and emotional processes behind speech behaviors. CAT considers the ways in which awareness that communicators are members of different social groups can influence interpersonal communication (Giles et al., 1991). In particular, it predicts that when a person views another person who they are communicating with as a member of an outgroup he or she will adopt communication strategies that are attuned to the perceived needs of styles of individuals from the outgroup. Often, these strategies or accommodations are based on stereotypes about the outgroup. The theory has been used extensively by communication scholars seeking to understand and explain interactions of interpersonal dyads and small group communication across many areas, including instructional communication (Dragojevic, Gasiorek, & Giles, 2015). Thus, communication accommodation theory is an appropriate theory to help understand the impact peer educators have on students' perception and learning outcomes.

Studies using communication accommodation theory help to explain how the theory is used within particular contexts. For instance, Watson and Gallois (1998) used the communication accommodation theory to help examine the interactions between health care professionals and patients because "each person's behavior influences the perceptions and responses of the others" (p. 345). In another study, Gasiorek (2013) sought to understand

how young adults are motivated to respond and the ways in which they respond to someone who has under-accommodated them. Results indicated that participants responded in one of three ways: directly, indirectly, or through avoidance of the issue. This research helps to confirm communication accommodation theory's suggestions that people accommodate depending on to whom they are speaking.

Street and Giles (1982) explain that CAT is derived from similarity-attraction, social exchange, causal attribution, and social identity principles. "A basic postulate is that communicators are motivated to adjust their verbal and nonverbal speech styles with respect to one another as a means of expressing values, attitudes, and intentions. In addition, it is the individual's perception of another's speech that will determine his or her behavioral and evaluative response" (p. 205). CAT seeks to explain an individual's motivations for, and constraints upon, speech behavior during social interactions, as well as the social consequences of altering speech behavior. CAT accomplishes this through an analysis of the cognitive and emotional processes that lead to convergent, divergent, and maintenance speech (Giles, et al.; Giles, Williams & Coupland, 1990). CAT also bears in mind the social cognitive impact between addressee and addressed, and the influence of the environment on their interaction. As a result, CAT is concerned with both objective and subjective states of being, examining how a communicative behavior is intended (based on the communicator's perception of the situation and of their interlocutor) and how it is perceived. To use CAT effectively within a group consultation, peer educators must understand three aspects of the theory: convergence, divergence, and maintenance.

Convergence

Convergence is the term for a communicator's attempt to align their communicative style and behavior to that of the interlocutor. "Speech convergence has been described as a linguistic strategy used by interlocutors attempting to adapt to the linguistic pattern used by one's partner" (Nussbaum, Pitts, Huber, Krieger, & Ohs, 2005, p. 290). However, a speaker bases convergent behavior on what they perceive the interlocutor's level to be. This is necessarily so, for convergent behavior happens in the midst of a communicative encounter, and the speaker must use what they can perceive about the interlocutor as a guide. Furthermore, "convergence is also not always to the perceiver's level, but to the level that the speaker believes the perceiver expects him to achieve" (Giles, et al., 1987, p. 21). Convergent behavior is often motivated by a desire for social approval. The effects of convergence are strongly tied to the intention believed to be behind the convergent behavior (p. 26). Thus, the interlocutor's perception of the speaker is of utmost importance.

Divergence

In contrast to convergence, divergence is "the way in which speakers accentuate vocal differences between themselves and others" (Giles, et al., 1987, p. 14). Studies of the perceptions of accent change in different situations show that in one situation, accent change is perceived favorably, and in another not, largely based on what social norms are in play in the particular situation (p. 24). Giles, et al. examine divergence in terms of intergroup interaction, citing studies that demonstrate that divergence can arise from a desire to maintain group identity and/or

membership over or against another group (p. 28). This divergence can even take the form of speakers adopting linguistic behaviors stereotypical of the group in which they wish to demonstrate their membership (p. 29). As a result, the authors point out that divergence is sometimes expected, and viewed positively (p. 33). In such situations, divergence can organize the interaction – making clear each participant’s role and point of view (p. 32). However, this application is better seen as an act of maintenance.

Maintenance

Maintenance is not as extreme as divergence, for it does not involve a change in communicative behavior. It occurs when “a person persists in his or her original style, regardless of the communication behavior of the interlocutor” (Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2005, p. 123). A person who neither converges nor diverges communicatively is attempting to maintain the current positions of the self and other during the interaction. Giles, et al. (1987) claim that maintenance can be motivated by a desire to be noncooperative, either out of disagreeability or out of a desire to maintain a distinct social or group identity (p. 28). Like convergence and divergence, the effects of maintenance depend on the attributed motives behind the maintenance behavior. Having discussed the central concepts and themes of CAT we move to defining and examining how (non)immediate behaviors encourage convergent, divergent, and maintenance speech.

Immediacy

Immediacy describes the amount of closeness and approachability that is present between people (Mehrabian, 1971). Immediate behaviors are both verbal and nonverbal communicative actions

(Gorham, 1988) that motivate people to participate, and encourage both connection and a sense of belonging. Immediate behaviors convey feelings of closeness. Immediate behaviors essentially create an environment of willing reciprocity, comfort, and attentiveness between interlocutors. As Richmond (2002) states, “immediacy is the degree of perceived physical or psychological closeness between people” (qtd. in Chesebro & McCroskey, 2002, p. 68). This closeness facilitates open communication and increases each participant’s satisfaction with the communicative encounter. Nonverbal immediacy includes such behaviors as eye contact, smiling, direct body orientation, close proxemics, gesturing, vocal inflections, and physical contact while communicating (Mehrabian, 1971). In contrast, nonimmediate behaviors include those that communicate “avoidance, dislike, coldness, and interpersonal distance” (Kearney, Plax, Smith, & Sorensen, 1988, p. 55), and can cause individuals to “avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer” (Mehrabian, 1971, p. 1).

According to Witt and Wheelless (2001), “the communication behaviors employed by teachers play a strategic role in student learning outcomes” (p. 327). Immediacy is positively related to affective and cognitive learning outcomes (Comadena, Hunt, & Simonds, 2007), teacher credibility (Teven, 2007), liking (Teven, 2007), and increases in student-teacher interaction (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Clearly, researchers have established the important role immediacy has as a teacher communication behavior. And in the communication center context peer educators are taking on many of the same roles that teachers do in the classroom.

Cuny, Wilde, and Stevens (2012), identify immediacy behaviors

as important for creating a connection between peer educator and speaker in the communication center. More recently, specific information about the role that nonverbal immediacy plays in peer educator interactions has been published in the book *Communicating Advice* (Atkins-Sayre & Yook, 2015). Immediate behaviors can be seen as strategies that produce a space for persuasion to occur; therefore, immediacy and persuasion form an interdependent relationship.

Persuasion

At its core, the goal of persuasion is to change or reinforce another's views. It involves the relocation of power, as the persuader attempts to control the views of the object of persuasion. As such, it is often viewed with suspicion. However, not all attempts to persuade are devious. In fact, persuasion permeates the large majority of our daily lives through our conversations with others. Therefore, persuasion is a necessity that allows society to operate. One of the primary ways persuasion accomplishes such tasks is through the use of rhetorical proof (or appeals) as delineated by Aristotle in *Rhetoric*.

When a situation requires persuasion, the speaker can employ pathos, ethos, and logos to ensure the speaker achieves the intended end. Pathos is the way in which the speaker influences the listener's emotions. Ethical use of pathos, as a means of persuasion, effectively taps into the emotions of the audience. Ethos, on the other hand, is the degree that the audience is inclined to trust the speaker. Without trust, the audience will not listen to the message, for mistrust of the speaker undermines the legitimacy of the message itself. Logos, accomplishes

its persuasion through the use of logic, including evidence, demonstration, and the implementation of inductive and deductive reasoning. Individually, pathos, ethos, and logos can be quite convincing; however, in combination, they produce powerfully persuasive rhetoric.

Application to the Group Consultation

How does knowledge of communication accommodation, immediacy, and persuasion assist peer educators in facilitating a more effective and efficient consultation? For clarity, the following is divided into sections corresponding to the stages of the group consultation itself: the perspectives will be studied as they reveal themselves within the beginning (introduction), the majority of the meeting (body), and the end (conclusion) of the group consultation.

The Introduction: CAT, Immediacy, and Persuasion

Peer educators have three goals in the introductory phase of a consultation: to uncover group problems and goals, to establish credibility and rapport, and to gain the group members' trust. During this phase, speakers and peer educators engage in small talk (Ward & Schwartzman, 2009) rife with convergent, divergent, and maintenance behaviors. Peer educators' awareness of these tenets of CAT help them to understand each group member's stance within the group. Convergent behaviors indicate a group member's satisfaction with the group, while divergent behaviors indicate dissatisfaction. Maintenance behaviors are ambiguous, for they may indicate real satisfaction, or they may indicate dissatisfaction the group member is putting aside for the good of the group. On the part of peer educators, convergent behaviors

may make the relationship with speakers too personal or informal, whereas divergent behaviors may alienate a speaker and reduce the peer educator's efficacy. Thus, peer educators should manifest maintenance behaviors as much as possible, to establish and maintain a working relationship and avoid interfering with the internal dynamics of the group.

Peer educators can use CAT to diagnose problems within a group and maintain para-professional credibility. The next two critical perspectives, working together and helping peer educators establish rapport, fall under the persuasive technique of ethos; however, it is accomplished using pathos and immediacy behaviors combined. Peer educators can appeal to the emotions of the speakers, using small talk and friendly nonverbal cues to highlight the similarities between them all. These immediacy behaviors encourage speakers to feel that the peer educator is invested in their successes. Peer educators must establish trust so that the speakers will be inclined to engage in dialogue and apply the peer educator's feedback and suggestions. Likewise, it is important at this stage to establish the supportive atmosphere of the center. This is partially accomplished by a peer educator's use of logos. In the initial stages of the consultation, peer educators must inductively determine the speaker's purpose in seeking help, usually through a series of formal questions. This logos aspect of the initial interaction supports the credibility of the speakers and the center, because it makes the speakers feel that the peer educator is equipped to handle the situation. Likewise, the credibility of the center itself works with the ethos of the peer educator to support the credibility of the feedback and instruction given during the consultation.

The Body: CAT, Immediacy, and Persuasion

At this stage in the consultation, the group's problems and goals should be clear. Now, peer educators gather and provide information to assist the speakers in addressing these problems and goals. A peer educator's goal in the group consultation is not simply to dictate what the speakers do; rather, it is to listen, offer suggestions, and support each speaker's self-improvement. The speakers should remain empowered, and the peer educator should maintain a guiding, rather than dictator, role. Thus, peer educators must facilitate conversation between group members, allowing them to interact with one another, working to accomplish the group goals while processing their verbal and nonverbal messages in real time. Peer educators must manage the convergent/divergent/maintenance behaviors of group members – reinforcing and encouraging convergent behaviors with positive immediacy behaviors (nodding head, open posture, smile, supportive comments, etc.), and responding to divergent behaviors with guiding questions to allow speakers to be self-critical and reflect on their own stances. For maintenance behaviors, which are inherently ambiguous, peer educators should allow the situation, as it evolves, to determine what immediate behaviors and what degree of persuasion are required for the situation.

In some instances, peer educators must take a stronger, more assertive role in guiding a group toward a resolution of problems and the achievement of its goals. If the consultation appears to be lagging or headed in the wrong direction, or if speakers appear disgruntled, it is time for the peer educator to take proactive measures in order to keep the consultation (and the group itself) from calamity. If the peer educator established sound rapport and

credibility in the introductory stage of the consultation, then they can resort to persuasion for help in managing these circumstances. This ethos provides a sound foundation for a peer educator to exert persuasive influence on the speakers. Peer educators may choose to add strength to their feedback and recommendations by framing each with a statement like, "I recently had another speaker with this problem, and she ..., which worked well." This appeals to ethos and logos, for it relies both on a peer educator's credibility in telling the anecdote, and also on the rational principle that similar problems call for similar solutions. If peer educators need to strengthen ethos, the response might include telling a similar, personal anecdote. This makes the speakers feel that the peer educator is on their level, and sympathizes with their situation. Thus, this technique uses pathos in addition to ethos. In any case, peer educators strengthen the persuasiveness of the input into the consultation only to guide the speakers toward their goals. Persuasion is used to increase the likelihood that the speakers will accept and apply the peer educator's comments, and thus supports the effectiveness of the consultation in general.

The Conclusion: CAT, Immediacy, and Persuasion

The conclusion of the consultation has four goals: to reinforce the content of the consultation, to review the action plan for moving forward, to ensure speaker satisfaction and improvement, and to ensure the speaker sees value in the support. Ideally, by the end of a consultation, the group and peer educator will all be exhibiting convergent and maintenance behaviors, and divergence will be minimal. This indicates that the peer educator has been successful in facilitating the unified progress of the group, and has increased the likelihood that they will act on the feedback and instruction

provided. In this ideal situation, the peer educator can manifest immediacy behaviors to reinforce personal ethos, and then capitalize on this by appealing to pathos and logos to recapitulate the content of the consultation. If the speakers are convinced of the peer educator's ability and desire to help, then the peer educator can use these feelings of admiration and mutuality, and a rational appeal, to restate and sum up the session in a persuasive way. If the body of the consultation has been successful, then the speakers will already feel that the peer educator has helped them, and so will more readily take any further suggestions offered.

Sometimes the consultation has been less than ideal. In these cases, peer educators can attempt to redeem the consultation in the conclusion by eliciting and gathering feedback, and attempting to resolve any remaining issues. This can be done by asking the speakers if there are any areas that need more attention, or any questions left unanswered. This can be characterized as an immediacy behavior, which can strengthen the speaker/peer educator relationship and build ethos, thereby allowing the peer educator to help the speaker more effectively. Questioning in this manner is an excellent way to respond to divergent behaviors in the conclusion, and can help resolve the underlying problems that give rise to such behaviors. Furthermore, this allows the peer educator to evaluate speakers' satisfaction and improvement and resolve issues in these areas. One of the best ways to increase the likelihood that a speaker will value the experience, and even encourage their peers to use the center, might be to accomplish the prior goals — reinforcing consultation content and checking speaker satisfaction and improvement. Just finishing the consultation in a strong and professional manner leaves the

speakers with a good impression, making them feel more satisfied with the consultation and the center.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In explaining the basic concepts of CAT – convergence, divergence, and maintenance – we provide a framework for beginning to understand communicative behavior during group consultations. We have also explained how immediacy and persuasion act within these communicative behaviors. Unifying these three critical perspectives, we have shown how each plays an important role in the process of a group consultation. When applied these perspectives can help to achieve specific goals in the communication center and make the consultation more effective overall. In doing this, we have demonstrated how immediate behaviors align and work within the theoretical commitments of CAT, and how immediate behaviors are connected with acts of persuasion.

While some have argued that conversations are too complex to be reduced to CAT and more recently research has shifted to an individual's perception to understand inferred motive in processing nonaccommodation (Gasiorek & Giles, 2015), we find merit in teaching CAT to peer educators when coupled with the recognition that conversations are infinitely complex speech acts. In the context of peer education in communication centers, where no two peer educators act or react in exactly the same way given the same set of variables, this argument should meet little resistance. Essentially, we establish a need for the inclusion of these critical perspectives in the training of peer educators working with groups in communication centers.

As in any attempt, much work remains to be done. Troillett and McIntyre (2012) note that the training of peer educators working in communication centers is vital to the success of all involved. While different aspects of peer educator training at one particular communication center have been documented (Cuny, Thompson, & Naidu, 2014; Cuny & Yarragunta, 2009; Davis, 2011; Davis, 2012; Davis, 2016; & Ellis, 2015) and Atkins-Sayre and Yook (2015) have published a book dedicated to the topic, there remains a need for a systematic examination of training practices. This leads us to suggest that communication center graduate students, directors, and researchers work together in designing such training, launching it across multiple centers, and conducting multi-method assessment of the training across multiple communication centers.

In addition to the need for more documented training methodologies, the conclusions from this essay need to be confirmed with data. This issue deserves our attention and future studies should investigate the intersection of communication accommodation theory, immediacy, and persuasion in order to gain a better understanding of the support peer educators can give in group consultations at communication centers. These endeavors could expand beyond a basic understanding of CAT into inferences, intentionality, and motive by including additional interpersonal adaptation or adjustment theories of mimicry, style matching, synchrony, and reciprocity. Toma (2014) argues that while the field of interpersonal adaptation is rich, the research “does not provide a cohesive and unified view of interpersonal adaptation but rather a multifaceted, complex and sometimes disjointed one” (p. 156). We challenge communication center researchers to use the conceptual clarity provided by Toma as well as the conclusions from this essay as a starting point for continual

examination.

Ultimately, it does not matter what area of study is being supported, peer educators who enter into meaningful dialogue (with their student peers) need a clear understanding of the motivations behind people's communicative acts. An intentional training program would allow peer educators to understand how to use communication to accomplish the goals of helping others become better communicators. Communication centers are well positioned to take the lead in such training. Finally, persuasion can be a positive force in many settings, but especially in the realm of radical education like that of communication centers.

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