

# THE RHETORICAL SITUATION MEETS ADULT EDUCATION: A PUBLIC SPEAKING WORKSHOP FOR B-SCHOOL GRADUATE STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Extant research indicates that there continues to be a gap between employer expectations and the oral presentation skills of B-school graduate students. In order to address this gap, the authors undertook a three-year effort to research, develop, and administer a public speaking workshop focused on preparing new business graduate students to meet industry demands for presentation skills and strategies. Survey and focus group data informed several revisions to the workshop plan. The series of revisions and participant responses point toward the importance of adjusting the elements of the rhetorical situation in order to account for the principles of andragogy when planning workshops for graduate students. The results of this study provide useful insights and direction for management and communication educators, trainers, and public-speaking specialists when developing their programs for their audiences.*

**Keywords:** *management education, survey research, rhetorical situation, andragogy, workshops, graduate students, elevator speech, public speaking*

## INTRODUCTION

Consistently, across the globe, employers and educators state with alarm that college graduates lack basic communication skills, both oral and written (Al-Mutairi, Naser, & Saeid, 2014; Belkin, 2017; Chandren & Yaacob, 2016; Tugend, 2013). The need for these soft skills cuts across disciplines and impacts all levels of higher education. Yet, they are particularly critical for business students where the necessary skills to present business ideas, strategies, plans, etc. to many different audiences and via multiple communication formats is vital to individual employee and organizational success.

Heretofore, much focus has been on improving these skills in undergraduate education by embedding the appropriate courses into the general education curriculum and by requiring relevant assignments in upper-level courses where students can master these skills. Less attention has been paid to graduate students where it is often incorrectly assumed that these skills have already been mastered before they enter the program. As enrollment in graduate programs in general and the enrollment of students from diverse language, cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic backgrounds in particular have increased, calls for augmented communication support for graduate students have become common across disciplines (Brooks-Gillies et al., 2015; Simpson, 2016). While scholarly attention has been devoted to graduate communication support for decades in disciplines focused on second-language learning, scholars from fields like composition studies, which focus on communication support for students across language backgrounds, have only recently joined the conversation (Simpson, 2016).

We argue that another missing communication element is support for oral presentations, and public speaking in general, at the graduate level. Tinoco and Alvarez (2015) conducted a research effort on the expectations and needs of employers versus the capabilities of graduate students in terms of oral presentation skills. Upon conclusion, it was determined that there continues to be a gap between employer expectations and the skill level of B-school graduate students.

As a result, the authors, a professor in business and two professors in communication, embarked on a research study to determine the best approach to improving the presentation skills of this demographic, particularly where the curriculum does not support separate classes and where diversity of student backgrounds in age, language, culture, education backgrounds and work experience widely vary. We propose that an effective approach to resolving this gap between employer needs and graduate student skills is a multidisciplinary workshop in the early part of the master program. To that end, through a series of workshops and corresponding surveys, we developed and fine-tuned a public speaking workshop format that promotes clear communication of ideas in rhetorical situations (persuasion) while responding to adult learner characteristics.

While the rhetorical situation and the principles of andragogy (adult education) are both decades old, using the elements of the rhetorical situation in order to structure a workshop that responds to the principles of andragogy is new. Our research demonstrates the value of putting these two theories into conversation in the planning stages for workshops, seminars, classes, and other instructional meetings for diverse participants.

With this backdrop, the paper proceeds in the following manner: First, a revisit to the need for this type of education for graduate students is presented. A discussion of the workshop as an education tool follows, along with the theoretical background associated with the rhetorical situation and adult education. We then present the evolving workshop design in more detail, integrated with the results of our multi-phase study. In this manner, the reader reaps the benefit of how the study progressed in format and content. Finally, we close with a discussion, limitations of the study and conclusions.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Identifying the Need**

Many professors who teach graduate students assume their students come to their courses with the communication skills necessary to succeed at the tasks presented. With respect to written communication, Sallee, Hallett, and Tierney (2011) state, “the expectation is that students already know how to write before they begin graduate school. Instructors of graduate students may assume that students learned basic writing skills during their high school and undergraduate years” (p. 66). The same can be said for oral communication skills, particularly those that are needed for clear presentation of ideas, plans, and projects to diverse audiences and for different purposes. Similar to writing skill levels, there is a basic assumption that students entering graduate school have learned and mastered the presentation skills and strategies necessary for success in their degree program and in the workplace.

This is not necessarily the case. Consistently, across the globe, employers and educators emphasize the importance of communication skills for graduates in business (Al-Mutairi, Naser, & Saeid, 2014; Baharun, Suleiman, & Awang, 2012; Cho, Kidd, Morthland, & Adkinson, 2017; Kalfa & Taksa, 2015). Some state with alarm that what graduates lack most are basic communication skills, both oral and written (Tugend, 2013). This disconnect between common

assumptions and reality creates the need for communication support designed specifically for business graduate students across campuses within and beyond the United States.

The assumption that students should have already learned to communicate effectively in their undergraduate years is commonly cited as a reason for the lack of communication support for graduate students at many universities. However, learning “basic communication skills” in composition and public speaking courses cannot prepare students for the vastly different ways in which they are expected to express ideas across the wide variety of academic disciplines they encounter in college. Furthermore, even if graduate students received their undergraduate degrees in the same discipline in which they pursue their graduate degrees, there is little guarantee that their undergraduate courses will have exposed them to the genres they will have to use in their graduate courses (Curry, 2016; Simpson, 2016). Additionally, as graduate student demographics become more diverse, many students are not prepared to meet expectations for communication at the graduate level, particularly in oral presentations. Thus, this rich diversity of students brings with it backgrounds comprised of different approaches, perspectives, and experience on oral presentations and public speaking in general.

Having laid this groundwork, we now turn our attention to the chosen education format: workshops in public speaking.

### **Workshops, the Rhetorical Situation, and Adult Education**

Workshops are currently a popular but relatively undefined form of graduate communication support. A recent study by Caplan and Cox (2016) found that workshops are the third most common form of support at institutions represented by the 297 people who took their survey (p. 28). Workshops are a standing component of established programs offering graduate communication support (Freeman, 2016), which is a testament to their value. This is good news for faculty and programs just starting to offer communication support for graduate students because the relatively small amount of time and resources that need to be invested in workshops make them a manageable option. For many graduate students, workshops may be preferable to for-credit courses due to constraints related to funding and time. Thus, the popularity of communication workshops for graduate students that is already evident is likely to continue to grow. However, little has been done to theorize workshops for graduate students, distinguish between various possible models for workshops, or offer best practices for graduate communication workshops. Caplan and Cox (2016) note that in their survey, “respondents’ comments suggest that *workshop* is a catch-all term for services that range from an occasional session to a systematic set of workshop series” (p. 30). The fact that workshops are widely used but largely undefined among faculty engaged in supporting graduate students’ communication efforts points to the need for further scholarship documenting strategies for conducting communication workshops and data measuring such workshops’ efficacy and student satisfaction. In this paper, we provide one such study of a public speaking workshop that relies on the elements of the rhetorical situation in order to respond to the needs of diverse adult learners.

In a study conducted by Tinoco and Alvarez (2015), industry representatives consistently emphasized the importance of tailoring one’s message to fit the expectations of specific audiences, indicating to the researchers that it was necessary to focus on the rhetorical situation in the workshops. With respect to the art of persuasion, the concept of “rhetorical situation” was coined by communication specialist Lloyd Bitzer in 1968 to name the social conditions that call for and shape an oral or written response. Bitzer (1968) defines rhetoric as “a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality

through the mediation of thought and action” (p. 4). According to Bitzer (1968), the three elements that comprise the rhetorical situation are “exigence,” or “an imperfection marked by urgency” that necessitates discourse (p. 6), “audience,” or “those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change,” (p. 8), and “constraints,” or “persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (p. 8).

A slightly modified version of Bitzer’s model is informed by instructional materials from composition studies. The rhetorical situation is commonly used in first-year composition instruction. It has been interpreted and reworded for usability in a variety of composition textbooks (Hacker & Sommers, 2016; Johnson-Sheehan & Paine, 2015; Ramage, Bean, & Johnson, 2006) and in other teaching materials created and used by composition instructors. While “audience” remains constant in these materials, “exigence” is often changed to “purpose,” (as in the reason the writer or speaker addresses the audience), and “constraints” is sometimes changed to “context” (as in social, physical, political, economic, etc.). “Constraints” can also be understood as “both the limitations and the opportunities present in a situation that bear on what may or may not be said to the audience . . .” (Hauser, 2002, p. 50). Like contextual elements, relevant constraints can be physical, psychological, etc. (Hauser, 2002). While consideration of audience, purpose, and constraints was an important part of the workshop from the beginning, it became increasingly important as we revised the workshop in order to account for the principles of andragogy.

Coming from another perspective, research in andragogy focuses on the ways in which adults learn, especially those that are distinct from the ways in which children learn, which is the focus of research in pedagogy. Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer scholar in adult learning, drew extensively from research and theory in the field of education to produce “a set of core adult learning principles that apply to all adult learning situations” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 2). The six principles are as follows:

1. ***The need to know.*** Adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it....
2. ***The learner’s self-concept.*** Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept, they develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as capable of self-direction....
3. ***The role of the learners’ experiences.*** ...Any group of adults will be more heterogeneous in terms of background, learning style, motivation, needs, interests, and goals than is true of a group of youths.... [This] means that for many kinds of learning, the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves. Hence, the emphasis in adult education is on experiential techniques—techniques that tap into the experience of the learners....
4. ***Readiness to learn.*** Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations....
5. ***Orientation to learning.*** In contrast to children’s and youths’ subject-centered orientation to learning (at least in school), adults are life-centered (or task-centered or problem-centered) in their orientation to learning....
6. ***Motivation.*** Adults are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries, and the like), but the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the

desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, and the like) .... (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, pp. 63-68)

The emphasis on these principles in workshops is not new. They have been drawn upon in a variety of contexts, from classrooms to business workshops to healthcare worker/patient interactions, for decades (Jolles, 2017; Russell, 2006). Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) assert that the long life that the six principles have enjoyed through generations of debate illustrate that “Adult educators, particularly beginning ones, find these core principles invaluable in the practical challenge of shaping the learning process for adults” (p. 2).

Knowles’s theory provides a foundation for understanding the complex social environment that many workshop leaders and teachers working with graduate students are likely to face. The audience is heterogeneous, which necessitates a multi-layered approach that engages people from a variety of experience levels. Furthermore, Knowles’s principles of andragogy provide benchmarks to hit in workshops designed for adult learners. Particularly in workshops that focus on communication and those that involve roleplay, the rhetorical situation can serve as a foundation for active learning activities that hit those benchmarks. The rhetorical situation also allows workshop leaders to create active learning tasks that become increasingly complex in predictable ways because it provides three elements that can be adjusted based on the needs of workshop participants.

In the following section, we describe insights that we have gained throughout the process of developing, conducting, and revising the workshop, which are likely to be of use to other faculty and management educators who are developing communication workshops for B-school and other graduate students. First, we describe the origins of the workshop and our initial conception of it. We then review insights from participant feedback and describe revisions we have made to the workshop in response. Finally, we discuss the implications of our experiences for readers planning workshops for diverse participants in other contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

Starting in Spring 2015, the authors developed a public speaking workshop for Master of Business Administration (MBA) students. This initiative began as a pilot workshop, and it became a standing part of the mandatory day-long orientation session that the business school now offers its new graduate students at the beginning of each fall and spring semester.

Each workshop was followed by a data collection effort. The first pilot study was restricted to seven participants and was followed by a focus group and online survey. Survey data, collected from four of seven participants (57% response rate), and the focus group with all participants provided helpful feedback for the first round of revisions. The second pilot workshop in Fall 2015 consisted of nine participants; an online survey link was provided as part of the workshop with a 100% response rate. It should be noted that participation in both pilot studies was voluntary, yet the workshops filled quickly and waiting lists were established. The first orientation workshop in Fall 2016 included an online survey to be taken following the workshop. There was a 0% response. As such, we switched to a paper-based survey, which we distributed at the end of the Spring 2017, Fall 2017, and Spring 2018 workshops. These received fifteen, seventeen, and eight responses, respectively, for a 100% response rate from each of the three administrations. All surveys included 5-point Likert scale questions asking participants to rate their overall satisfaction with the workshop and with the workshop’s speed and organization. They also included short response

questions in which participants were asked to identify the most beneficial aspects of the workshop and important take-away points, along with basic demographic information. We based the most recent workshop revision on the Spring 2017 survey and analyzed responses to the Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 surveys to assess that revision. The following section describes the workshop design and the revisions we made to it in response to participant feedback.

## RESULTS

### **Initial Pilot Workshop: Testing the Waters**

The initial pilot workshop schedule featured an opening discussion in which participants shared impressions of effective and ineffective aspects of speeches they have observed in the past. A series of very short lectures focused on reducing communication apprehension and speech delivery preceded two speaking tasks. For the first speaking task, participants read an excerpt from a speech by a world leader in order to practice delivery. For the second speaking task, each person was assigned a topic at random and delivered a short impromptu speech on the topic. Just before participants began to prepare their impromptu speeches, we gave a short lecture on strategies for inventing content in response to the rhetorical situation. We introduced the elements as follows:

- Audience: To whom are you speaking?
- Purpose: Why are you speaking to that audience?
- Constraints: What opportunities and limitations are presented by the physical and social context?

Bringing the elements together, we asked study participants to consider what information is most important to include in a speech in order for the speaker to achieve his purpose with his audience given the time constraints.

We collected feedback in response to the initial pilot workshop by holding a focus group. Participants, almost all of whom spoke English as an additional language, provided overall positive feedback regarding workshop activities. They saw the impromptu speech as the most beneficial activity because it allowed them to put what they had learned from the lectures and discussions into practice. This reflects a preference for task-centered orientation to learning, which aligns with Knowles's fifth key principle of andragogy. The participants appreciated the opportunity to be active and challenge themselves. They noted that having to prepare and deliver a speech in a short amount of time created "beneficial stress." They also valued the feedback that they got in response to their speeches, with some students reporting increased confidence upon learning that their accents did not prevent comprehension.

The participants provided minor recommendations for future workshops including more discussion of ways to relax and stay on track while giving speeches in a second language. While they enjoyed reciting speeches from leaders, they listed that as a less useful activity because it is not something they would likely have to do in the future. Both of these recommendations align with Knowles's fourth principle, which states that "adults become ready to learn those things that they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations" (p. 65). The students also stated that they commonly experienced anxiety speaking publicly in a foreign language, so they were motivated to learn strategies for coping with that and disappointed that such strategies were not offered.

### **Second Pilot Workshop: Focusing on Real-Life Tasks**

We revised the schedule for the second pilot workshop based on the initial feedback. We retained the opening discussion, short lectures, and impromptu speeches but removed the leader speech and spent more time discussing strategies for giving public speeches in a second language in order to promote further readiness to learn. In addition, one of the workshop leaders gave a sample impromptu speech and received feedback from participants before the participants began giving their own speeches. This provided a model and gave participants the opportunity to practice critiquing speeches before offering feedback to each other.

Feedback in response to the second pilot workshop was overwhelmingly positive. Of the nine respondents, 89% were extremely satisfied with the workshop content, and 11% were moderately satisfied. Seven of the nine respondents indicated that the impromptu speech was the most beneficial part of the workshop, further illustrating the importance of task-based learning.

### **Initial Orientation Workshops: Facilitating Adult Learning with the Elevator Speech**

For the first two workshops that we held as part of the MBA program's new student orientation in the Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 semesters, we made the first round of revisions that honored the principles of andragogy by focusing on audience, purpose, and constraints. First, we changed the topic of the speaking task from a randomly assigned topic to an "elevator speech," a short, somewhat informal speech describing one's professional experiences, professional goals, and/or academic research (Cox & Marris, 2011).

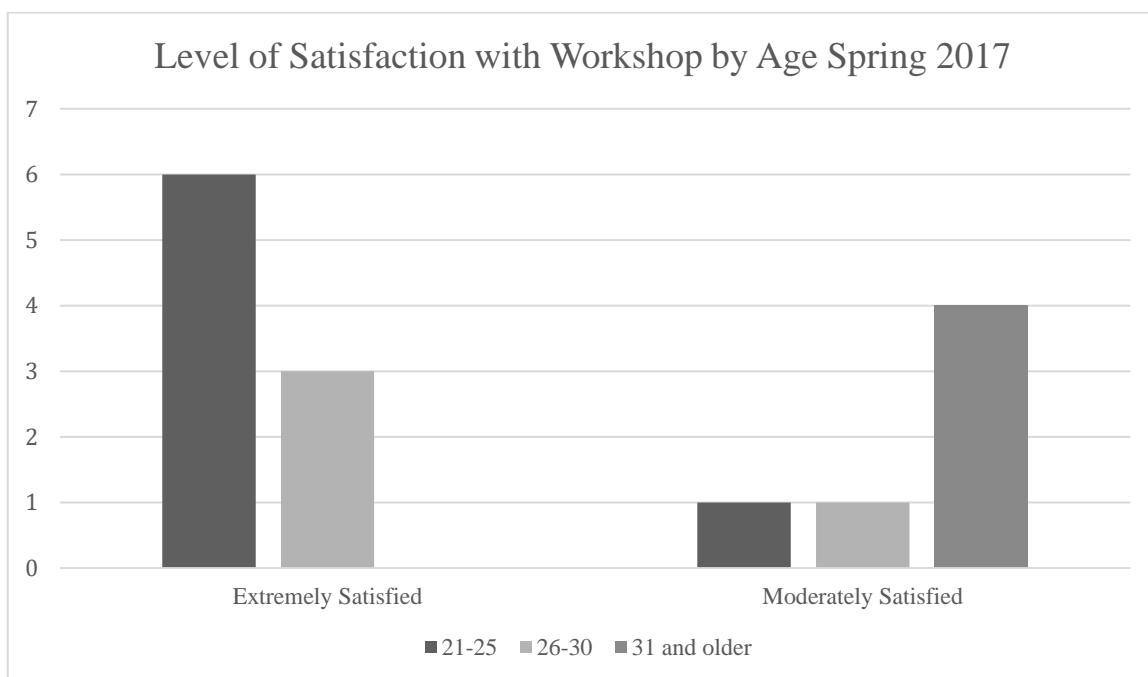
We made this change in order to promote "readiness to learn." According to Knowles, Holton & Swanson (2005), "Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations. An especially rich source of *readiness to learn* is the developmental tasks associated with moving from one developmental stage to the next" (65). Participants are likely to face the elevator scenario often in their daily lives, and for MBA students fresh out of their undergraduate programs, the need to make an elevator speech is associated with moving from one developmental stage to the next. The social dynamics that mark the exigence and constraints of the elevator scenario are likely to be new to those students. As undergraduates, participants may have been more likely to see "elevator audiences" like professors as just teachers, not potential advisors and mentors; fellow students were likely to be just classmates as opposed to potential research or business partners. The new social context establishes the demand for specific content. In an elevator with an industry representative, for example, graduate students are expected to speak fluently about their professional experiences and academic areas of specialization. Therefore, for some participants, thinking about and preparing the elevator speech marks the entrance into a new stage of professional life. The elevator speech's connection with this new phase promotes readiness to learn, especially among less experienced participants.

Assigning an elevator speech prompted another change: the addition of an MBA student to serve as a workshop speaker. One student's insightful comments in the second pilot workshop showed us that, as Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) explain, "the richest resources for learning reside in the adult learners themselves" (p. 64), so we decided to include her contributions in the workshop schedule. For orientation workshops, the MBA student gave an elevator speech to serve as a model. She also emphasized the importance of the elevator speech genre by describing opportunities that had arisen for her to make one. Finally, she described her strategies for altering her speech depending on whom she was speaking to, where they were, and how much time she had. Her examples both illustrated the importance of adjusting content to fit the given audience,

purpose, and constraints and provided an opportunity for participants to learn from the experiences of a peer, another adult learner.

The Spring 2017 survey showed that the workshop was well received, but it also indicated that we needed to do more to acknowledge the heterogeneity among participants in terms of background and relevant experience. All survey respondents named the elevator speech as the most beneficial or one of the most beneficial activities in the workshop, affirming the value that adults place on authentic task-based learning. However, the level of satisfaction decreased somewhat in comparison to the pilot workshops. The survey responses suggested that the workshop's change in status from voluntary to mandatory, which resulted in the enrollment of participants with extensive amounts of public speaking experience who likely would not have volunteered to participate in such a workshop, may have contributed to the decrease in satisfaction. When asked to rate their satisfaction with the workshop content, choosing from "extremely dissatisfied" to "extremely satisfied" on a 5-point Likert scale, 60% of the fifteen respondents said they were extremely satisfied, and 40% said they were moderately satisfied. Satisfaction decreased as age increased, with a clear drop in satisfaction for participants age thirty-one and over, as Figure 1 illustrates. Satisfaction also decreased with professional work experience level, particularly among participants with seven or more years of experience, as all three respondents in that category reported being moderately satisfied while none reported being extremely satisfied, as Figure 2 illustrates.

**Figure 1: Level of Satisfaction by Age - Spring 2017 Workshop**

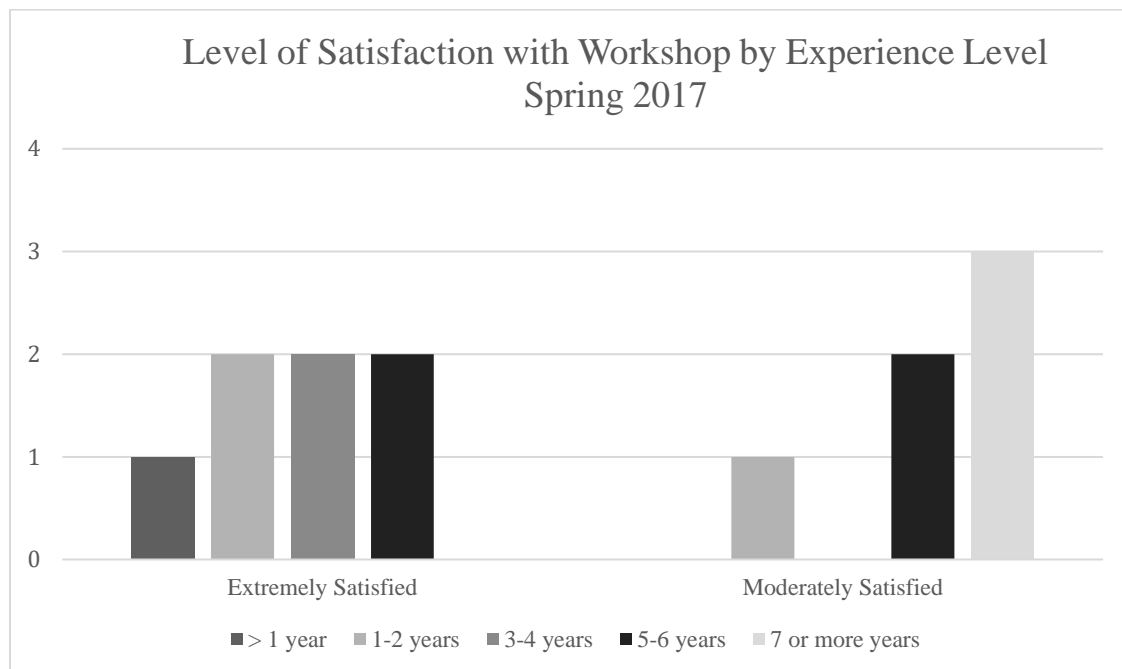


The survey results sent a clear message that we needed to engage older participants more effectively and provide more opportunities for everyone to learn from those participants' extensive professional experience. As with most graduate programs, MBA cohorts at our institution include students from a wide array of cultures and generations with a variety of experiences. Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) acknowledge that heterogeneity should be expected among any group



of adult learners and accounted for in lesson plans (p. 64). We geared the initial workshops toward younger participants from a variety of language backgrounds with limited professional experience because that is who we anticipated would sign up. When the workshop was incorporated into the mandatory orientation, we knew that our audience would be more diverse. However, in order to introduce central concepts and make sure that the tasks we assigned would be achievable for everyone in the limited time we had for the workshop, we retained the original workshop model with only small revisions. The Spring 2017 survey results showed that older participants recognized this and thus saw the workshop as holding limited relevance to them. Those responses inspired a major revision to the speaking task.

**Figure 2: Level of Satisfaction by Work Experience - Spring 2017 Workshop**



### **Revised Orientation Workshop: Increasing Flexibility with the Rhetorical Situation**

Knowing that the speaking task is the focal point of the workshop, we decided to revise that activity with several goals in mind. First, in order to engage more experienced participants and give less experienced participants the opportunity to learn from them without becoming overwhelmed, we wanted the speaking task to increase in difficulty with participant experience level. In addition, we wanted to illustrate the importance of recognizing and responding appropriately to audiences, purposes, and contexts that business professionals commonly face.

As a first step, we invited participants to group themselves based on their level of experience with public speaking, and we adjusted the assigned speaking tasks' level of difficulty according to participant experience level. The least experienced participants still gave an elevator speech about themselves, while more experienced participants were asked to discuss an app on their phone for audiences and purposes that are common for business professionals in industry settings. In addition, we made the elements of the rhetorical situation in speech prompts increasingly specific as experience levels rose. For the least experienced participants giving the elevator speech, we specified only the audience. For example, one participant was asked to give

an elevator speech to a fellow classmate, one to a professor, one to a representative of their industry, and so on. For moderately experienced participants, we specified both audience and purpose. All participants had to discuss an app on their phone, but one had to pitch the app to a prospective client; one had to instruct employees to complete a task related to the app; one had to brief prospective investors on projected sales of the app next quarter, and so on. Finally, we specified audience, purpose, and constraints in speaking task prompts for the most experienced participants. For example, one person had to pitch the app to an international audience; another had to brief the press about something that has gone wrong with the app, while another person had to pitch the product to a prospective client via Skype. We also gave the most experienced participants the option of speaking in response to an assigned prompt or another challenging situation of their choice that is similar to one that they have faced in their professional lives.

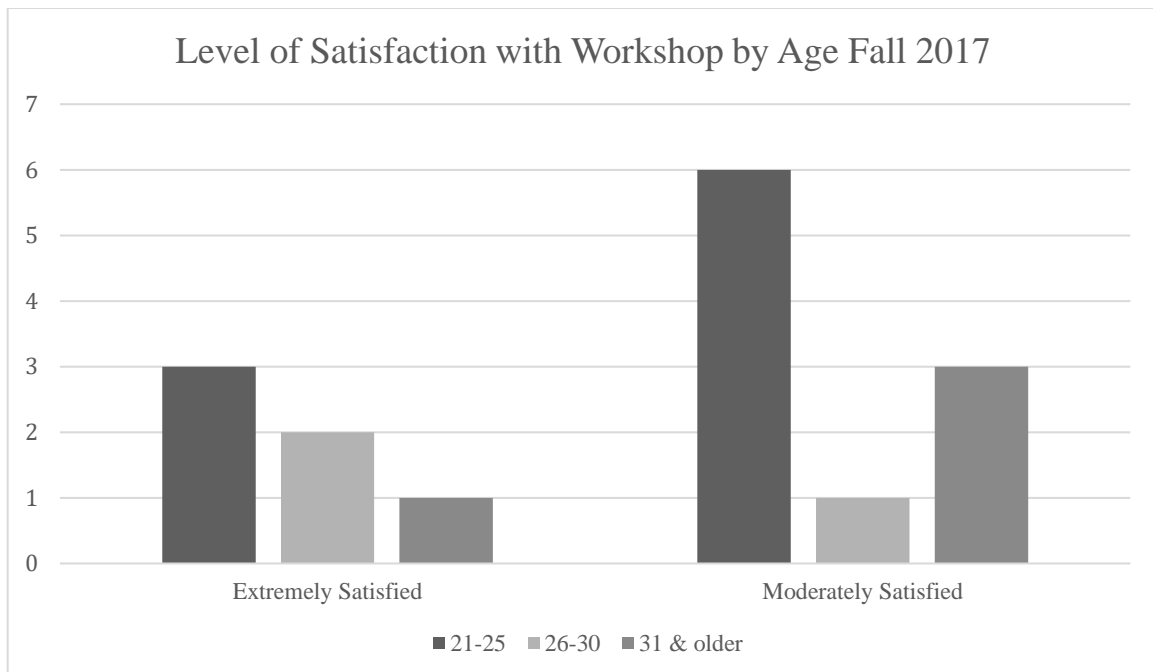
Participants gave their speeches twice: once in a practice round in which they received feedback from peers and facilitators regarding what they did well and ways to improve, and once to audience members tasked with guessing their rhetorical situation. For the second presentation, prompt assignments were not identified before the speeches. Audience members took notes about each speech, then tried to guess each person's audience and, if applicable, purpose and constraints after the speech concluded. These changes aimed to promote increased engagement among participants listening to the final speeches, illustrate how content and delivery vary according to audience and purpose, and give participants opportunities to learn from each other in ways that go beyond mere praise and criticism.

These changes promote readiness to learn for more experienced participants by simulating the kinds of communicative demands that business professionals commonly face on the job. While the elevator speech may mark a new stage of professional development for less experienced participants, the more experienced participants may have already given countless elevator speeches. The revised speaking task likely represents a new phase of professional development for moderately experienced participants because the tasks position the speakers in leadership roles. Allowing the most experienced participants to speak in response to a situation that they have actually faced foregrounds their extensive professional experience and provides other participants with the opportunity to learn from them. This strategy is particularly important with mixed groups of participants because, as Quick (2012) argues, "Tapping into the nontraditional students' knowledge of workplace settings may. . . help traditional students benefit from those with more extensive workplace experience. [It also] validates the nontraditional students and their nonacademic background, a crucial concern for effective andragogical teaching" (p. 249). The post-speech discussions further emphasize the role of the learners' experiences by giving participants the opportunity to offer feedback and impressions of each other's speeches and reflect on how their own speeches were perceived by their audience.

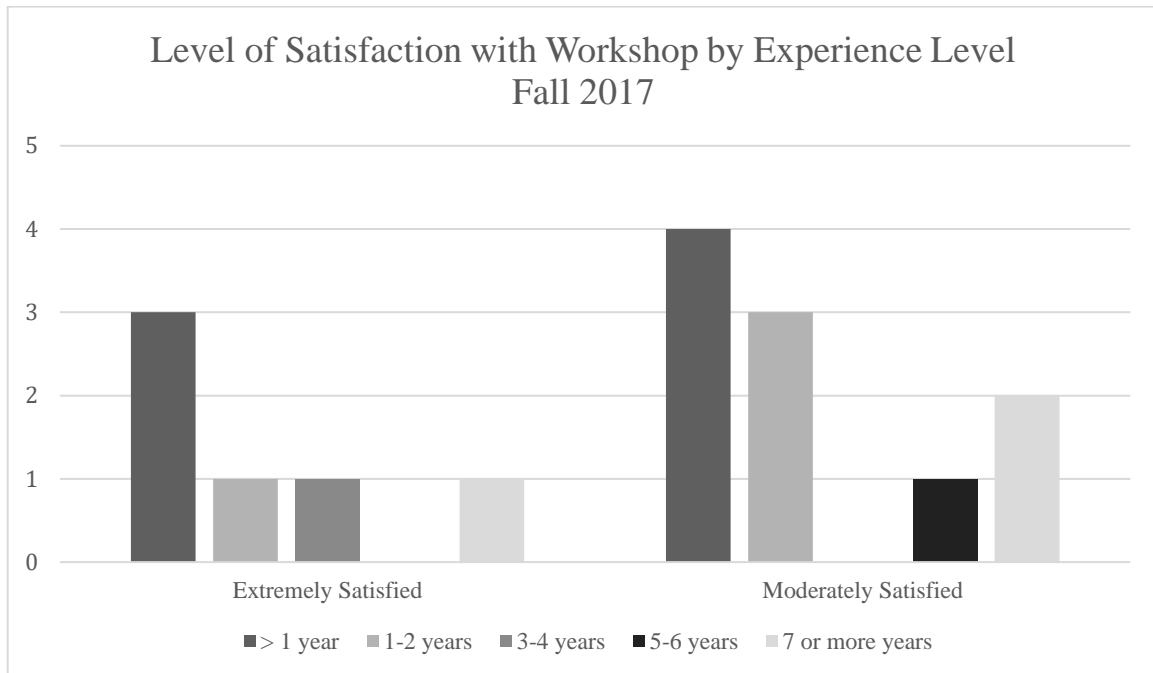
The opportunity for all participants to group themselves according to experience level and the most experienced participants' option to choose their speech topic acknowledge the adult learner's self-concept. As Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2005) explain, "Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions, for their own lives. Once they have arrived at that self-concept, they develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as capable of self-direction" (p.63). Making the workshop part of the mandatory orientation violates this principle because it takes away the choice of whether or not to participate. For this reason, providing opportunities for participants to self-direct within the workshop program and relating tasks to their goals and experiences in order to communicate the workshop's relevance are all particularly important for creating buy-in.

Fall 2017 survey results indicated that our revisions were somewhat successful at engaging older participants. As Figure 3 shows, of participants aged twenty-six and older, 43% reported being extremely satisfied with the Fall 2017 workshop while 57% reported being moderately satisfied. This stands in comparison with 38% of respondents in the same age group reporting being extremely satisfied and 62% being moderately satisfied with the Spring 2017 workshop. However, the survey results also show lower levels of satisfaction among younger participants. Of participants aged twenty-one to twenty-five, 33% reported being extremely satisfied with the workshop, while 67% reported being moderately satisfied. This is a considerable drop in satisfaction in comparison to participants of the same age group from the Spring 2017 workshop, 86% of whom reported being extremely satisfied with the workshop, while 14% reported being moderately satisfied. Additionally, one Fall 2017 respondent reported being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the workshop, but that participant did not indicate his or her age in the survey.

**Figure 3: Level of Satisfaction by Age - Fall 2017 Workshop**



Overall, these results suggest that we may have “overcorrected” our workshop design in favor of older participants. Results were similar when considered in terms of professional work experience. As Figure 4 shows, the satisfaction level increased slightly among the most experienced participants, as one of three participants with seven years or more of experience indicated being extremely satisfied with the Fall 2017 workshop, with the other two being moderately satisfied. This is a slight uptick in comparison to the Spring 2017 survey, in which three of three participants with seven or more years of experience reported being moderately satisfied with that semester’s workshop. However, whereas half of participants with between five and six years of work experience reported being extremely satisfied with the Spring 2017 workshop, the one participant with that experience level reported being moderately satisfied with the Fall 2017 workshop.

**Figure 4: Level of Satisfaction by Work Experience - Fall 2017 Workshop**

Reasons for the decrease in satisfaction among younger participants are not entirely clear from the survey. It is possible that unrelated changes to the Fall 2017 workshop led to the decrease. The speaking workshop always takes place alongside other orientation activities. In the past, our workshop happened in the morning, but we had to hold the Fall 2017 workshop in the afternoon because of scheduling issues. By the time our workshop began, the students had already been participating in orientation activities for four hours and seemed to be tired, which may have contributed to the drop in satisfaction. We also were met with logistical challenges in room availability for small group work, which likely contributed to the drop in satisfaction.

### **Second Revised Orientation Workshop: Rerunning the Revisions**

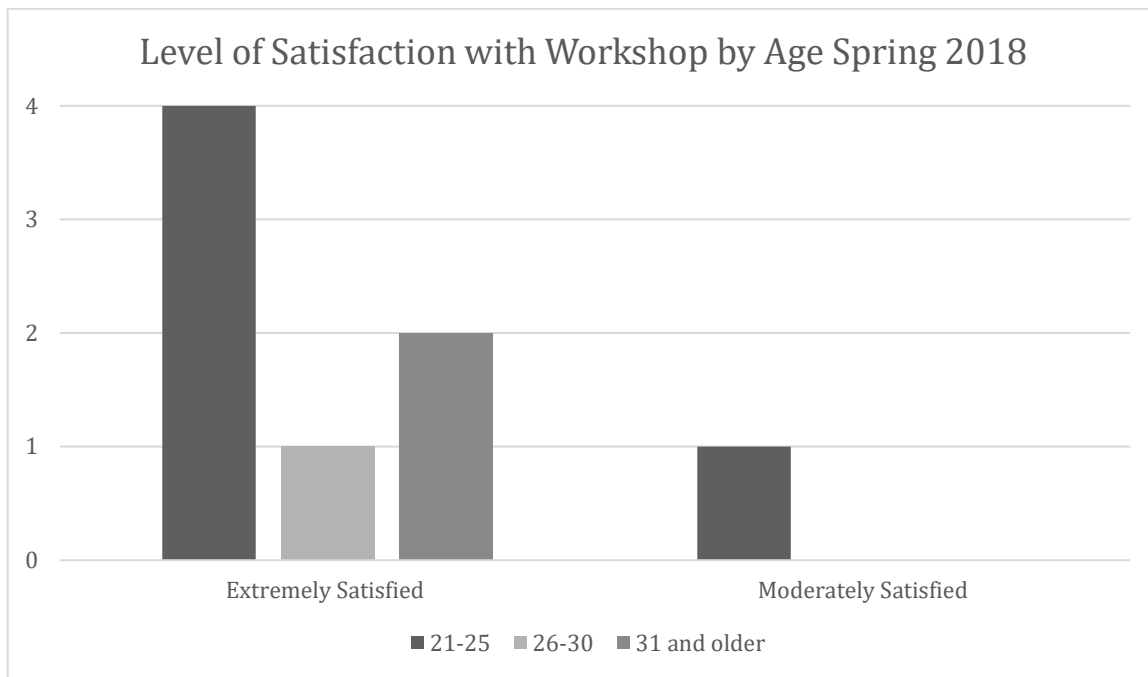
The comments on the Fall 2017 survey did not indicate that the revisions we made to the speaking task resulted in the decreased satisfaction among younger participants. As with the previous workshops, all participants who offered comments listed the speaking task as the most helpful aspect of the workshop. Several participants noted that they appreciated the feedback that they got from others in response to their speeches. Two participants commented specifically that they appreciated the opportunity to present to an audience that did not know what their prompt said. This pointed toward the effectiveness of the most recent revision for at least some of the respondents. Because the revisions to the Fall 2017 workshop did not seem to cause the decreased satisfaction, we ran the Spring 2018 workshop in the same way that we ran the previous one.

As Figures 5 and 6 show, survey responses assessing the Spring 2018 workshop were very positive. All respondents age 26 and older were extremely satisfied with the workshop, and 80% of respondents age 21-25 were extremely satisfied. As with the last workshop, respondents consistently commented on the benefits of the speaking task and the multiple rounds of feedback they received from their peers. Participants of all experience levels reported being extremely

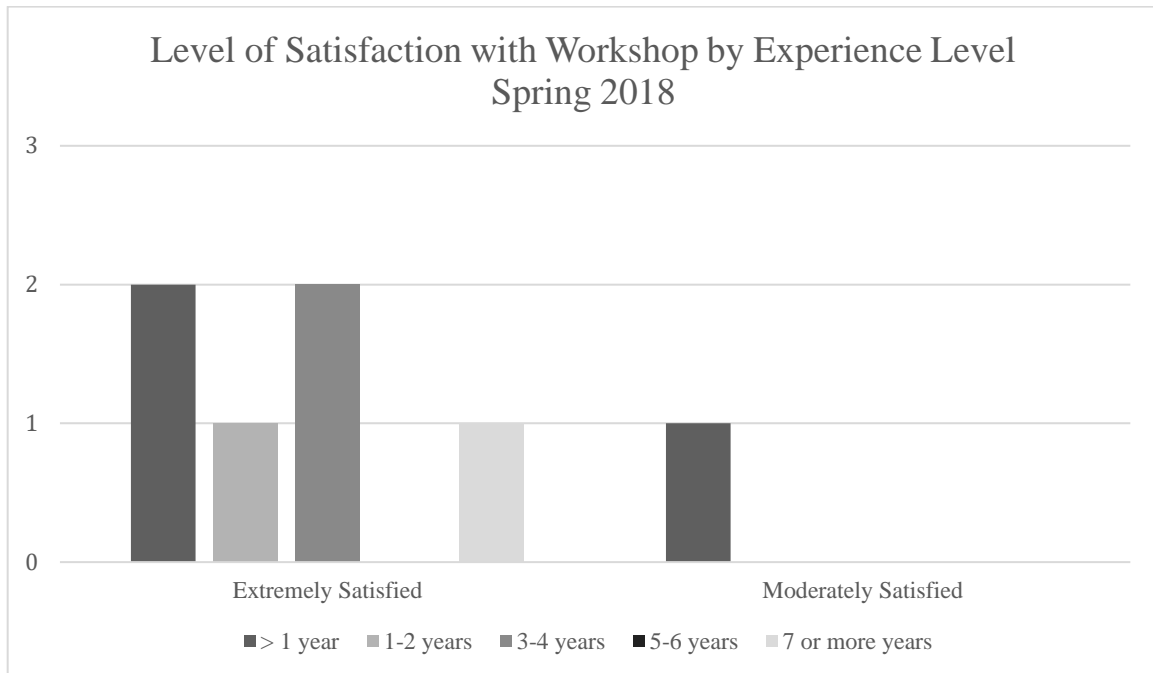
satisfied. Only one participant, who had less than one year of experience, reporting being moderately satisfied. One participant did not indicate his or her level of experience.

Reasons for the jump in satisfaction for the Spring 2018 are not entirely clear but may be related to the number of workshop attendees. With only eight students, the Spring 2018 group was much smaller than previous orientation groups, which made splitting into groups to practice the speaking task run more smoothly. Also, the small number of participants made it possible for all participants to present to the full group, including all three workshop leaders, for the final speech, which was not possible in the Fall 2017 workshop.

**Figure 5: Level of Satisfaction by Age - Spring 2018 Workshop**



Like earlier workshop attendees, the Spring 2018 survey respondents consistently named the speaking task and related activities as the most beneficial parts of the workshop. When asked the most important take-away points from the workshop, one 21-25-year-old participant with two years of professional experience provided the following response: “Rhetorical question, role-playing for ineffective/effective skills. Professors gave us good feedback on how we can improve our speech. It was a concise but great learning experience. I really liked the example about the Skype call that students did earlier. It helped understand that we should be ready for changes during presentation and adapt accordingly.” This response indicates that the revised speaking task successfully addressed some of the principles of andragogy.

**Figure 6: Level of Satisfaction by Work Experience - Spring 2018 Workshop**

The respondent's emphasis on the rhetorical situation and feedback relate to the principle of readiness to learn, which states that "Adults become ready to learn those things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with their real-life situations" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 65). The respondent recognizes the need to speak to diverse audiences under varying constraints as something that arises frequently in everyday life and appreciates the information from the workshop that will allow her to think about those situations more systematically. Feedback is particularly relevant when it comes to coping with real-life situations because it focuses specifically on participants' individual strengths and weaknesses, and they can draw upon that feedback to improve their public speaking in the future. This respondent's comment on the Skype call, a common physical constraint that business people face, relates to the principle of readiness to learn as well as the role of the learners' experiences. This participant appreciated learning from a more experienced workshop participant by watching that person address a complex but common physical constraint. Comments like these indicate that the adjustments we made to the speaking task have been at least somewhat successful in responding to the range of needs and experience levels represented by workshop participants.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Overall, our experience creating, assessing, and continually revising this workshop revealed the importance of considering the principles of andragogy when planning communication workshops for graduate students. Particularly in required workshops for large and diverse groups of participants, carefully structuring task-oriented activities with the principles of andragogy in mind helps to respect and engage participants from a variety of backgrounds and experience levels while making optimal use of a short amount of time. Focusing on and working with the rhetorical situation allowed us to structure the speaking task in a way that aligned more closely with those

principles and also gave participants opportunities to consider ways in which the content and delivery of speeches, whether formal or informal, vary according to audience, purpose, and contextual constraints. Our workshop is still a work in progress and will continue to evolve as we learn more from the adult learners who participate in future workshops.

Our story has implications for organizers preparing communication workshops for graduate students or other diverse groups of adult participants in other contexts. First and foremost, our story illustrates that workshop organizers should think carefully about participant backgrounds and adjust plans accordingly. Next, workshop organizers should carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks of making any workshop mandatory. If it is necessary to make a workshop mandatory, building opportunities for self-direction into the workshop is important since the mandatory nature takes away the initial opportunity to self-direct. In addition, organizers should foreground the workshop's relevance to participants' lives throughout the workshop, from introducing the purpose to offering concluding commentary. Hands-on tasks should be the central focus of workshops for graduate students due to adult learners' preference for active learning, and the more immediately applicable a task is to participants' experiences and goals, the more invested participants will be in completing and learning from those tasks. Finally, structuring active learning tasks using the elements of the rhetorical situation allows workshop organizers to adjust those tasks in ways that are appropriate for participants from a variety of backgrounds and experience levels by adjusting the audience, purpose, and contextual constraints to which participants must respond.

### **Limitations**

Our study reveals some possible limitations or improvements. This and similar studies will benefit from pre-test and post-test of skill levels, as well as follow-up interviews with participants or focus group conversations to our data-collection methods in order to learn more about what did and did not work well in each workshop in order to revise effectively. Lastly, we began to collect data from workshop participants one year after the workshop to assess whether they retained and used what they learned; however, the response rate was low. Consequently, the effort was dropped from subsequent data collection efforts. It may be beneficial to readdress this activity and find ways to improve response rate.

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