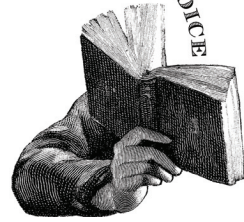


EDITOR'S CHOICE



Find Your Voice: eliminate classroom phobias

**Michael V.
Miranda**

Dr. Miranda is an Assistant Professor of psychology at Kingsborough Community College of the City University of New York.

The academically underprepared community college student may also be psychosocially underprepared for college, a condition contributing to the development of classroom-specific social phobia and to the high attrition rate at community colleges. The Find Your Voice Program uses individual and group cognitive-behavioral techniques to develop students' academic and social integration with the college, thereby promoting active learning, academic success, and persistence in the pursuit of an Associate's degree.

Introduction

The primary symptom of social phobia is a “marked and persistent fear of one or more social performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The fear involved is a fear of acting in a manner that would be embarrassing or humiliating to the individual and/or a fear of showing an extreme amount of anxiety in situations in which the others present seem quite comfortable. The performance situation in which most social phobics experience symptoms is speaking in public (Alloy, Riskind, & Manos, 2005; Kendler, Myers, Prescott, & Neal, 2001), a fear shared by academically underprepared and superior students alike. The commu-

nity college classroom can be a breeding ground for the anxiety that might be called classroom-specific social phobia as a result of exposing the underprepared student to unfamiliar people, some of whom are academically superior classmates, and to scrutiny by these classmates and the professor.

Context of the underprepared

The University of Chicago established the first public community college in the United States in 1901 when six high school graduates desired to remain in their local community of Joliet, Illinois, while pursuing higher education (Joliet Junior College, n.d.). Given the fact, however, that only eight percent of the country's high school students graduated in 1900 (Berger, 2005), it must be assumed that these six original community college students, graduates of Joliet Township High School, possessed the academic skills and motivation necessary for success in college.

Many of today's community college students, however, attend two-year schools because they are underprepared academically, socially, and/or economically for the rigors of a four-year college program (Valadez, 1993).

They often perceive the public community college as a stepping stone to their four-year degrees. Yet, sadly these students are significantly *less* likely to earn a four-year degree than are those students whose initial college enrollment is at a four-year college (Alba & Lavin, 1981; Bohr et al, 1994; Dougherty, 1987; Temple & Polk, 1986; Velez, 1985). In fact, Tinto (1993) reports that the rate of program completion for two-year college students (i.e., the percentage who earn an Associate's degree) is approximately one-third the completion rate of all beginning full-time students nationwide. More specifically, students who enter a four-year college in pursuit of a Bachelor's degree have a higher probability of earning that degree than students who enter a community college do. Thus, while the public community colleges are doing an excellent job of providing opportunities for students who might not otherwise have been able to begin a college education, they need to improve their record of working with these students toward the completion of their college degrees.

According to the Digest of Education Statistics, there are 1,076 two-year public degree-granting institutions in the United States (National Center

for Education Statistics [NCES], 2005a). Together, these colleges had a Fall 2003 semester enrollment of more than six million students (NCES, 2005b). Forty-five percent of all first-time freshmen enrolled in colleges in the 2003-2004 academic year were enrolled in community colleges (Dicroce, 2005). And, in the Fall 2003 semester, more than half of all the public college students nineteen years of age or younger were in attendance at two-year community colleges (NCES, 2005c). A substantial number of these community college students are classified as being academically underprepared.

To fulfill the mission of providing the opportunity for higher education to all interested students, 93% of public two-year colleges admitted students through a policy of Open Admissions in the 2003-2004 academic year (NCES, 2005d) and 99.6% of those colleges offered academic assistance and/or remedial/developmental services to their students (NCES, 2005e).

While developmental courses often bring underprepared college students up to the levels of performance that enable them to succeed academically (Hennessey, 1990; Hoyt, 1999; Kraska, Nadelman, Maner, &

McCormick, 1990; Napoli & Hiltner, 1993), these services are insufficient for the significant number of community college students who do not earn their degrees. For these students, help of a different sort would seem to be necessary.

Some researchers suggest that a modification of the traditional college lecture format through the use of a variety of strategies that may be encompassed by the term “active learning” is the answer. Learning communities (MacGregor, 1991; Malnarich, 2005; Matthews, 1993; Raftery, 2005), small group projects, completed both within and outside the classroom (Bean, 2001; Hennessy & Evans, 2006), and problem-based learning formats (Beers, 2005; Sungur & Tekkaya, 2006) have been applied by some with successful results for many community college students. But since there remain students who are not helped through these methods, educators are compelled to develop still other ways to bring academic success to the nontraditional, high-risk students attending community colleges.

Find Your Voice

Program rationale

Assuredly, academic skills have a direct relationship to academic

performance and overall success in college, but it is important to keep in mind that our community college students may also be psychosocially underprepared for the college experience. The psychosocially underprepared student lacks the level of self-esteem and the internal locus of control necessary to propel him or her through the obstacles that often appear on the road to graduation. Failing a single exam or receiving an uncomplimentary comment from a professor on an essay may be all that is needed for a psychosocially underprepared student to stop attending classes (Ochroch & Dugan, 1986).

Researchers have identified academic and social integration as requirements for the maintenance of the effort needed for college success. According to Tinto (1993), integration is the degree to which the student is successful at establishing membership in the college community. Academically, this means experiencing the sharing of information, perspectives, and values in the classroom; socially, this means forming the interpersonal connections that result from day-to-day interactions throughout the campus. The degree to which integration is accomplished, and whether or not it happens at all, is influenced

by a variety of factors, some of which are related to the personality and background of the student. For example, relationships between integration and socioeconomic status, personality traits, previous academic achievement, and initial college experiences have been established as significant influences (Munro, 1981; Osborne, 1997; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983a, b; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Pascarella, Smart, & Ethington, 1986). Strauss & Volkwein (2004, p. 218) state that "in particular, classroom experiences and social activities and friendships are especially strong predictors of institutional commitment" and academic success.

Community college students, in addition to being more academically underprepared than students who enter a four-year college, also have significantly more problems with their attempts to establish social integration in the college environment (Tinto, 1997; Tinto & Russo, 1994). The community college student most likely commutes to the campus each day and has multiple obligations in addition to his or her academic responsibilities. For this student, academic and social integration must take place concurrently within the classroom. At the same time, the student's

external communities (i.e., family, friends, and work) must be adjusted to accommodate the academic demands being placed upon the student (Napoli & Wortman, 1998). With the additional pressures, the academically underprepared community college student who is perfectly comfortable in other environments may experience classroom-specific social phobia, a condition that prevents him or her from actively participating in class or college life in general. Neither academic nor social integration is possible when the student experiences physical and emotional indicators of anxiety.

Students who suffer from classroom-specific social phobia do not want to be noticed. They do not want their professors to know their names. They simply want to be allowed to do their work to the best of their abilities as anonymously as possible and to avoid all embarrassment and any public confirmations of what they believe are their academic and personal shortcomings. It takes all the strength that classroom-specific social phobic students possess just to be able to attend classes. Any additional pressures created by the active learning practices of the professor are likely to be too much for them to handle.

A variety of treatment methods are available to the individual who is diagnosed with social phobia. There are even treatment modalities provided through Internet (Botella, Hofmann, & Moscovitch, 2004) and virtual reality (Klinger et al., 2005) experiences. However, when research is conducted on the short-term and long-term effectiveness of treatments for social phobia, behavioral and/or cognitive-behavioral treatments are identified as the treatments of choice. The most effective psychotherapeutic techniques include exposure therapy, social skills training, and cognitive restructuring (Beidel & Turner, 1998). In the Find Your Voice Program, it is these techniques that are being successfully used to help students overcome classroom-specific social phobia at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn, New York.

Overview of the *Find Your Voice Program*

The Find Your Voice Program facilitates the development of both academic and social integration between the underprepared student and the college community by providing opportunities to practice new behaviors in a safe environment with the encouragement and support of the professor and

fellow students. With practice, students with classroom-specific social phobia become comfortable communicating with the professor, in small groups consisting of other Program students, and in the larger classroom, thereby reducing the experience of phobic symptoms and increasing self-esteem. Ultimately, Program “graduates” serve as mentors to Find Your Voice Program students in subsequent semesters.

By the end of the first semester of Program participation, many students are actively participating at a level that is higher than that required by the Program. The word “required” is a bit misleading here, however. Putting pressure on students to meet Program requirements will only intensify their phobic responses and they will likely seek to reduce their anxieties by avoiding the stress-producing situation completely. (Through “avoidance learning,” phobics discover that they can immediately feel better by avoiding the phobic situation.) Therefore, it is very important for Program participants to know that they will not be pressured to participate on any given day. They are always free to disregard any and all agreements that they have made with the professor regarding the expectations for their classroom

behavior should their anxieties be unusually high. The professor must always maintain an encouraging, supportive atmosphere and must never communicate disappointment to any student. Every indication of progress, no matter how small or how long it took the student to accomplish it, is praised.

Recruiting students

The first responsibility of the professor instituting a Find Your Voice Program is to recruit students. Active recruitment is necessary since Program “graduates” consistently report that they would never have volunteered for the Program had the professor simply announced its existence and encouraged interested students to identify themselves. Program participants, therefore, must be individually invited to take part in the Program, something that is usually possible by the end of the second week of the semester. By then, the professor has had sufficient time to observe the students in class and, perhaps, has received the first assignment and/or quiz result. Find Your Voice Program students report that the personal invitation to join delivered by the professor makes them feel “important” and “special.” They appreciate being recognized as good stu-

dents and, because this personal invitation will be directed to the five or six students in the class identified by the professor as candidates for the Program as a group, they immediately recognize that other students share their anxieties.

During the delivery of the invitation to the small group of selected students, the professor must accomplish three things. First, it must be made clear that the professor has noticed that each of the students seems quite dedicated to doing his or her best in class by virtue of his or her attentiveness, note-taking practices, and excellent attendance. Second, the students are informed that the professor has also noticed that they choose to be uninvolved in class discussions and that, for some students, this choice may be due to the experience of some personal discomfort in the classroom. Finally, the students are asked to consider whether it might benefit them to overcome any discomfort that they might be feeling. The students are then given the basic details, verbally and in a written handout, about the first phase of the Program. They are asked to make a decision by the next class whether or not they would like to participate by completing a form designed for that purpose.

Due to the extra work involved with students in the Find Your Voice Program, professors should be wary of the number of invitations they extend to their students. No more than five or six invitations to the Program should be offered per class. In most cases, no more than three Program students should be selected from any one class.

Once the students have been identified and congratulated on their decision to participate, the Find Your Voice Program progresses through the semester in three tracks—class participation, small group participation, and relaxation training—and in two phases.

Find Your Voice Program: Phase One

Phase One of the program begins in the third week of the semester and continues until mid-semester for most students. Class participation during Phase One involves the use of the behavioral techniques of systematic desensitization and exposure therapy (Tryon, 2005), applied to enable students to become more comfortable with answering questions in class and more accustomed to hearing the sounds of their own voices in the classroom. Specifically, each student is assigned

a question that will be asked within the first five or ten minutes of the class on the following day. A brief answer, sometimes consisting of only one word, to that question is also provided. Depending on the preferences of those involved, the information is transmitted either in person, via e-mail, or through a telephone call. These contacts with the professor contribute to the student's social integration with the college, and they may actually be the first time that the phobic student has had any meaningful contact with any faculty member outside of the classroom.

Also during Phase One, the first of approximately six small group meetings is scheduled. All of the professor's Find Your Voice Program students, regardless of the classes they attend, are invited to these meetings. Students attending small group meetings are routinely shocked to discover that there are so many students who struggle with the very same problems that they do. When they realize that their situations are not unique, the students experience an increase in their levels of self-esteem and an immediate connection to the other Program students.

At the first of the meetings, students are asked to identify the perceived causes of their dif-

iculties with speaking in class. The emotional connections between the students intensify as the discussion usually reveals that these causes cluster into one of three areas: very low levels of self-confidence in their academic abilities, past school experiences in which a teacher embarrassed them in the classroom, and fears that others have difficulty understanding them due to their strong foreign accents. When these issues are discussed in small groups, students benefit both from receiving support from others as well as from providing support to others.

Whenever possible, the small group meetings should be conducted in classrooms. Since most Program students quickly come to look forward to their participation in the small group discussions, conducting them in classrooms allows the students to become desensitized to an environment in which they had previously experienced consistent stress.

There is a physical component to every phobic response. Some phobics, for example, experience muscle tension when they find themselves in situations and/or environments in which they are likely to experience anxiety. Others may develop headaches, stomach distress, a

rapid heartbeat, elevated blood pressure, or other physical indicators of stress. It is helpful, therefore, for phobic individuals to receive some relaxation training in order to reduce these physical reactions. Deep muscle relaxation, controlled breathing exercises, meditation, and self-hypnosis are some of the many techniques available for this purpose. Instruction in one of these methods is recommended and might be scheduled for a portion of the second small group meeting and for portions of some of the meetings that follow.

Find Your Voice **Program: Phase Two**

Students are moved into Phase Two of the Program for class participation on an individual basis and with their consent once there is some evidence that they have become comfortable with the activities scheduled in Phase One. In Phase Two, which lasts from approximately mid-semester until semester's end, answers to assigned questions are no longer provided, and students are encouraged to expand upon the briefer answers usually given during Phase One. Multiple questions may be assigned and questions may now be asked at any point during the class.

The changes made in Phase Two enhance the student's aca-

demic integration and represent a significant advance over the very structured question-and-answer-within-the-first-five-minutes format practiced during Phase One. The purpose of the changes is to shape the student's behavior so that it will more closely approximate normal, unstructured classroom behavior. As was the case in Phase One, it is important for the student to know that it remains possible for him or her to decide against participating on any given day without any need to inform the professor in advance.

The majority of small group sessions scheduled for the semester will take place after most of the students in the Program have moved on to Phase Two. The professor is less active in these sessions and serves mostly to provide supportive comments and to introduce appropriate topics for discussion (e.g., What could be done to enhance your experience in the Program? What could be done to help you address the causative factors that led to your anxiety?). The sessions serve two purposes since they provide students an opportunity to practice their public speaking skills as well as to involve themselves in helpful personal discussions.

In Phase Two, there is continued instruction in the relaxation technique introduced in Phase One. More specifically, students refine their techniques of relaxation so that they can be used during classes without it being obvious to the others in the room.

Find Your Voice Program “graduates”

After students have completed the semester, some will wish to continue in the Program. Those students enter Phase Three. Some may register for a second course with the same professor, in which case, the Program continues from the Phase Two level. Others might identify a professor from their current semester’s schedule whom they feel would be a good Find Your Voice Program professor. If that happens, it is recommended that the student’s initial Find Your Voice Program professor be the person to approach the second professor with Program information and an invitation to participate. If the new professor agrees, he or she can work in class with the student while the initial professor continues to conduct the small group meetings.

Most “graduates” from the Find Your Voice Program take

advantage of an open invitation to attend all future small group Program meetings. Their levels of self-esteem and self-confidence continue to rise as they benefit from being viewed as mentors by the current semester’s students. Also, with each group session attended, the student’s degree of social integration with the college strengthens and his or her relaxation skills improve.

Data collection and program assessment

The Find Your Voice Program at Kingsborough Community College is still in its early stages of development. So far, the components in each phase of the Program and, in fact, the phases themselves have been student-driven. That is, once the initial students have been selected for the Program, their individual needs and rates of progress determine when some of them are ready to move into a second phase and what the components of that phase should be. No formal system for measuring the Program’s success was predetermined, so self-reports and unsolicited notes of appreciation submitted by some students exist as the only measures of Program effectiveness at this time. Two examples of these notes follow.

A note written by one student on the bottom of the form that she returned indicating her interest in participating in the Program reads as follows:

I have been thinking about “finding my voice” for a long time, but could not find the way to overcome this problem. ... I will be glad to participate in a program that can help me increase my confidence and play a more active role not only in class discussions but in my life in general.

In the Program’s first semester, only one student participated. Two semesters later, this first “graduate” wrote:

I want to thank you again for helping me get rid of the fear I had when it came to talking in class. During my history classes, I now ask and answer questions constantly without any problems. And since the professor is older and has trouble hearing, there are times when I really have to speak up loudly and sometimes even repeat what I say three times in order for him to hear me. ... It feels as if I have been speaking in class for years without any problems. ... Talking in class also makes me feel smarter.

The Program completed its third “developmental” semester in Fall 2006 and is expanding in Spring 2007 semester with the inclusion of eight additional faculty members who will join with the Program’s creator and offer the Program to approximately seventy-five students. With growth comes the need to assess the Program’s effectiveness, and the Spring 2007 semester will be the first during which data is formally collected.

Experience with the Program thus far indicates that the students who are selected by their professors in the first two weeks of each semester will naturally divide themselves into three distinct groups: (a) those who elect to participate in the Program and who do so vigorously, taking advantage of every Program offering as they attempt to overcome their phobias; (b) those who elect to participate in the Program and who do so minimally; and (c) those who do not elect to participate. The three groups will be compared by grade-point averages and the average number of course withdrawals for all semesters prior to the semester of Program participation and for all semesters following the initial semester of Program participation. Data from the semester of initial Program participation

will be excluded from the analysis. Additionally, graduation and transfer rates will be calculated and demographic data will be collected for all students.

It was decided not to attempt to measure the more personal Program benefits even though improvements in such traits as self-esteem have been universally evident in all “vigorous” participants in the Program. The rationale for eliminating measurements of personality variables is that subjecting participants to such assessments early in the Program might result in withdrawals from the Program.

Every phobia has two components—first, a fear that is irrational given the danger to which one is actually being exposed and, second, behaviors that are directed at avoiding that exposure (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Thus, it is against the nature of a phobic person to routinely confront the source of his or her fear. Program participants would be reminded of personal weaknesses and/or perceived shortcomings should they be required to respond to a formal personality measure. When this happens before the students have had the opportunity to experience the gradual successes that the Program is designed to provide, it could contribute toward deci-

sions to avoid the stress of addressing their fears in favor of a retreat to the comfort of continued classroom anonymity.

Conclusion

The components of the Find Your Voice Program work together to address both of the factors that Tinto (1993) identified as prerequisites for the persistence that makes success possible at community colleges—academic and social integration with the college community.

Academic integration, defined as the experience of sharing information, perspectives, and values in the classroom, is accomplished through the systematic desensitization of the students to the previously anxiety-producing classroom activities such as raising one’s hand, asking and answering questions, and expressing a point of view. Social integration, defined as the formation of interpersonal connections that result from day-to-day interactions throughout the campus, is enhanced by the daily contacts with the participating professor, by the small group meetings with other Program participants, and through involvement with classmates who now have the opportunity to develop and show respect for Program students as they participate more in class.

It is the combination of cognitive-behavioral, individual and group psychotherapeutic techniques that is responsible for the academic and social integration which leads to the success of Find Your Voice Program students. It is the success of the Find Your Voice Program students that is responsible for a heartwarming sense of pride and accomplishment for the faculty member who chooses to participate in the Program.

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