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## Silence is Not Golden: Reducing Communication Apprehension in the University Classroom

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# Silence is Not Golden: Reducing Communication Apprehension in the University Classroom

## Summary

Learning research suggests that students are more motivated, learn better, become better critical thinkers, and have self-reported gains in character when answering questions, contributing to class discussions, or presenting to the class (see Rocca, 2010 for a review). However, Howard and Henry (1998) reported that 90% of course activities that involve classroom communication are made by only a handful of students. One reason for this is what researchers have termed *communication apprehension* (McCroskey, 1977), also referred to as participation anxiety (Karim & Shah, 2012). Many sources offer tips to help students manage their own anxiety (e.g., Young, 1990), however, few sources actually address tools instructors can use to create an environment that reduces the fear of participating. In this session, participants explore the underlying causes of communication apprehension/participation anxiety and strategies that can be implemented to create a low-anxiety classroom environment. The primary goal is to encourage participants to increase participation in their classrooms by changing the classroom from an atmosphere of insecurity and anxiety to one that enhances the natural communication strengths of students.

## Keywords

participation anxiety, communication apprehension, post-secondary students

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## **Silence is Not Golden: Reducing Communication Apprehension in the University Classroom**

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### **SUMMARY**

Learning research suggests that students are more motivated, learn better, become better critical thinkers, and have self-reported gains in character when answering questions, contributing to class discussions, or presenting to the class (see Rocca, 2010 for a review). However, Howard and Henry (1998) reported that 90% of course activities that involve classroom communication are made by only a handful of students. One reason for this is what researchers have termed *communication apprehension* (McCroskey, 1977), also referred to as participation anxiety (Karim & Shah, 2012). Many sources offer tips to help students manage their own anxiety (e.g., Young, 1990), however, few sources actually address tools instructors can use to create an environment that reduces the fear of participating. In this session, participants explore the underlying causes of communication apprehension/participation anxiety and strategies that can be implemented to create a low-anxiety classroom environment. The primary goal is to encourage participants to increase participation in their classrooms by changing the classroom from an atmosphere of insecurity and anxiety to one that enhances the natural communication strengths of students.

**KEYWORDS:** participation anxiety, communication apprehension, post-secondary students

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

By the end of this workshop, participants will be able to:

- identify and describe the underlying causes of communication; apprehension/participation anxiety during class participation;
- devise in-class activities to help students assess communication apprehension at the start of the course;
- apply strategies to increase class participation in their courses.

### **REFERENCE SUMMARIES**

Howard, J. R., & Henry, A. L., (1998). Student participation and instructor gender in the mixed-age college classroom. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 69(4), 384-405.

This article lists some of the benefits of student participation in the university classroom and highlights the reluctance of most students to participate. Using a triangulation of research methods (observations, surveys, and interviews), Howard and Henry followed university courses over a 16-week semester to explore the impact of gender, age, and course level on student participation. This article is a resource for the workshop brief lecture on “causes of low participation”. The results of the investigation demonstrated that even though students saw participation as important (both male and females of all ages) and 1/3 of students would like to participate more, findings suggested that this was not happening (across all course levels). Howard and Henry concluded that it was only a handful of students in a given classroom who participated regularly.

Karim, N. H. A., & Shah, M. I. A, (2012). Silence is not golden: Investigating classroom participation anxiety among university students. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 20(2), 228-235.

The goal of this study was to test for differences in participation anxiety between males and female students, between local and international students, and between bachelor programs. The authors revised the 20-item Classroom Apprehension Participation Scale (CAPS) to a 5-item scale to assess a new construct they termed “classroom participation anxiety” that is highly reflective of communication apprehension. The authors observed students inside and outside of the classroom and noticed that the students’ communication apprehension behaviours displayed inside the classroom disappeared once they left the classroom. They noticed that the CAPS included behaviours that were too broad and that were not clearly defined as occurring inside the classroom. Therefore, the authors developed a measure of participation anxiety that they believed was specific to the classroom environment. Using this scale they investigated the relationship between students’ perceived oral competence, students’ motivation to study, teachers’ verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviours, and students’ classroom participation anxiety. Results revealed differences between degree programs and between local and international students. Additionally, students’ perceived oral competence and teachers’ verbal immediacy behaviours were associated with participation anxiety while non-verbal immediacy behaviours and students motivation to study were not. This workshop uses this article to identify and describe potential causes of communication apprehension/participation anxiety in the classroom environment.

Neer, M. R. (1987). The development of an instrument to measure classroom apprehension. *Communication Education*, 36(2), 154-166.

This study was designed to test an instrument that was developed to measure classroom apprehension. A 20-item self-report scale called the Classroom Apprehension Participation Scale (CAPS) was developed and then used to identify the level of apprehension during class discussion of 324 undergraduates. This research helped to generate a profile of the classroom apprehensive students including a list of behaviours including avoid class discussion, their preferred seating location during discussions, and the non-verbal and verbal behaviours that best describe their classroom communication. The workshop uses the information from this study during the brief lecture on communication apprehension. Specifically this article is used to define communication apprehension, describe its characteristics, and identify some of the possible underlying causes.

Rocca, K. A. (2010). Student participation in the college classroom: An extended multidisciplinary literature review. *Communication Education*, 59(2), 185-213.

Rocca (2010) presented a multidisciplinary literature review on student participation in the university classroom to provide professors with suggestions for increasing participation in their classrooms. The current workshop uses this article to demonstrate the value and benefit of participation in the classroom, reasons why students do not participate, and how participation can be increased. The facilitator of the workshop asks the students to list and discuss benefits of participation and ensures the benefits described in Rocca (2010) are

discussed. A strength of this article is that it views participation through a multidisciplinary lens. The facilitator can highlight that there may be differences between disciplines.

Young, D. J. (1991). Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment: What does language anxiety research suggest? *The Modern Language Journal*, 75(4), 426-439.

This article reviews the research and theory on language learning anxiety and presents six potential causes of communication apprehension/participation anxiety and a variety of approaches that instructors can use to help create a “low-anxiety classroom atmosphere”. Specifically, Young presents a review on research studies looking at second and foreign language anxiety and provides a framework for creating a low-anxiety classroom. This workshop uses this information to illustrate that cultural factors need to be considered in the classroom environment. In addition, the causes and strategies for prevention outlined in the article can apply to generalized classrooms, not just language classrooms.

#### CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Duration (min)	Subject	Activity	Purpose
15	Introduction and Getting-to-know You Activity	<p>See Appendix A for a sample handout to distribute. Explain to the participants that the handout will be used throughout the workshop.</p> <p>Following Frisby et al.'s (2014) suggested strategies to prevent anxiety begin with an introduction and engage participants in a getting-to-know you activity. This activity can be done in small groups for larger workshops or as a whole group when the workshop is a small group. One example is the “I’m unique” activity where all participants are asked to share one thing that makes him or her unique. For additional activities see the link: <a href="http://www.lcc.edu/cte/resources/teachingettes/icebreakers.aspx">http://www.lcc.edu/cte/resources/teachingettes/icebreakers.aspx</a>.</p> <p>Following this activity engage the participants in a follow-up discussion where you ask the following:</p>	<p>Establish a positive environment and provide an opportunity for participants to get to know one another and the instructor. Create an environment where the learner is expected to participate and the instructor is willing to listen.</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are some factors that might influence using a getting to know you activity in your classroom?</li> <li>• How else could you set the tone of your first class to promote participation from day one?</li> <li>• Other ideas for activities that can be used in the first class?</li> </ul> <p>After the discussion provide the participants with the following example of an activity that can be used in the first class that is specific to reducing anxiety. This activity is not completed in the workshop rather it is an example of an activity that they can use in their own classroom. <i>The “Sharing Course Trepidations” activity helps students identify their anxieties surrounding the course. In pairs or small groups, have participants share their trepidations about the course. Follow this up by either having participants introduce each other and/or by asking the groups to share what they consider to be the most significant concerns or fears regarding the course. As the groups share, the instructor can validate and address their concerns as appropriate.</i></p>	
2	Learning Objectives and Workshop Overview	Present the learning objectives and structure of the workshop.	Familiarize the participants with the purpose of the workshop; provide the expected learning outcomes of the workshop.
5	Student Participation Inventory	Refer participants to the handout (Appendix A). Section A is an inventory of classroom participation activities. Instruct the	Discuss the various types of student participation in the classroom, highlighting

	<p>Activity and Brief Discussion</p>	<p>participants to put check marks next to the ones that they have used. They can add any activities not listed in the <i>other</i> box.</p> <p>Allow for a brief discussion with contribution from the participants of various disciplines. During the discussion use the following prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which activities would you like to use in your class?</li> <li>• What is the ratio of teacher talk to student talk in your class?</li> <li>• What percentage of your students typically participates in classes?</li> </ul> <p>After the discussion, re-focus the group and briefly describe any points that were not mentioned during the discussion. Key points for the discussion include the following examples of participation.</p> <p><i>Examples of participation in the classroom:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteering answers</li> <li>• Asking questions</li> <li>• Contributing to discussions</li> <li>• Peer explanations/peer teaching</li> <li>• Poster presentations</li> <li>• Individual and group presentations</li> </ul>	<p>that there may be differences between disciplines.</p>
<p>5</p>	<p>The Benefits and Importance of Student Participation in the Classroom</p>	<p>Ask the participants the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the benefits of student participation in the classroom?</li> </ul> <p>Facilitate a brief discussion with contribution from the participants. After the discussion, re-focus the</p>	<p>Discuss the benefits and importance of student participation in the classroom.</p>

		<p>group and briefly describe the points that were not mentioned during the discussion. During the discussion provide participants with validation for contributing an idea and expand upon their response.</p> <p>Key points include the following benefits reported in the literature (based on Rocca, 2010 and Czekanski and Wolf, 2013):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased motivation</li> <li>• Earn higher grades</li> <li>• Increased appreciation of cultural differences</li> <li>• Increased interpersonal, listening, and speaking skills</li> <li>• Less memorization</li> <li>• Higher levels of thinking (interpretation, analysis, synthesis)</li> <li>• Gains in character</li> <li>• Increased time management skills</li> <li>• Reduced participation anxiety</li> </ul>	
5	Lack of Student Participation and Reasons for Low Participation	<p>Brief Lecture: Introduce a study conducted by Howard and Henry (1998) on student participation in the college classroom.</p> <p>Drawing on the work of Young (1991) and Karim and Shah (2012) explain the various causes of low participation reported in the literature. Ask participants to offer examples of their own experiences with participation in the classroom.</p>	<p>Demonstrate that despite the importance of student participation, actual student participation in the university/college classroom is low.</p> <p>Identify the factors that may result in low participation in the classroom. Recognize “participation anxiety” as a factor often not discussed and it will be the main topic of the workshop.</p>



5	Introduction to the Concept of Communication/ Participation Apprehension	<p>Brief Lecture:            Introduce the concept of oral communication apprehension (also known as participation anxiety) as defined in Holbrook (1987) and Neer and Kircher (1989) and the self-report questionnaire used to measure this phenomenon (based on Neer, 1987).</p>	Define communication apprehension in an educational context, illustrate that it is a phenomenon seen in university students, and discuss the negative impact it can have on the classroom.
3	Introduction to Participation Anxiety Questionnaire	<p>Provide participants with the 5-item Participation Anxiety Self-Report Scale developed by Karim and Shah(2012). See Appendix A Section B.</p> <p>Once the participants have completed the scale independently explain the scoring system and allow them to score and reflect on their score independently.</p> <p>This questionnaire has a 5-point scale ranging from 5 (strongly disagree) to 1 (strongly agree). High scores mean high anxiety and low scores mean low anxiety.</p> <p>1-5 not anxious at all            6-10 not anxious            11-15 somewhat anxious            16-20 anxious            21-25 highly anxious</p> <p>Following the activity have participants brainstorm a question or a way that they can assess participation anxiety in their class other than administering a questionnaire.</p> <p>Some possible answers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During the first class discuss their previous experience with participation in the classroom (e.g.,</li> </ul>	

		<p>presentations, volunteering answers, engaging in discussions)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generate a discussion and assess the willingness of students to participate</li> </ul>	
10	Causes of Communication Apprehension in the Classroom	<p>Lecture: Based on Young (1991), explain 5 of the potential underlying causes of communication apprehension. Ask participants to offer examples of previous experiences they have with each cause.</p> <p>If participants do not feel comfortable sharing personal experiences, share your own experiences.</p> <p>Make clear the overlap with causes of low participation in the classroom. The similarities help to make clear how low participation and communication apprehension are associated.</p> <p>Identified causes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students perceived oral competence</li> <li>2. Instructors verbal immediacy behaviours</li> <li>3. Students fear of evaluation</li> <li>4. Personality traits e.g., low self-esteem, shyness</li> <li>5. Cultural/ethnic divergence in communication norms</li> </ol>	Identify the factors that cause communication apprehension in the classroom. Emphasize that the reasons for lack of participation is not because the student does not understand the material or does not know the answer.
20	Strategies to Decrease Anxiety in your Classroom	<p>Group Discussion: Break the participants into small groups of approximately 4 to 5.</p> <p>Assign each group a cause of communication anxiety that was previously discussed. Ask participants to consider the following questions:</p>	After learning about what can contribute to communication apprehension/performance anxiety, this section encourages participation by asking attendees to come up with solutions to help

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What strategies can you (as an instructor) use to prevent communication anxiety in the classroom?</li> <li>• What suggestions do you have for instructors who wish to create a most comfortable interactive classroom environment?</li> <li>• What factors would you need to think of that may be specific to your discipline?</li> </ul> <p>Ensure that groups are working on task; walk around the classroom and engage the groups in conversation to keep everyone on topic and to determine when discussions are wrapping up.</p>	instructors create a low-anxiety classroom environment.
15	Strategies to Create Low-Anxiety Classroom	<p>Large Group Discussion: Ask each group to share one key strategy that they discussed in the brainstorming session. After each idea is presented ask participants to discuss the benefits and challenges of each strategy they present.</p> <p>Facilitate and guide the discussion to ensure that all or most strategies relevant to decreasing communication apprehension/participation anxiety are introduced to the participants based on strategies outlined in Young (1991). Direct the students to the handout section C (Appendix A) for a resource of the discussed strategies to use in their classroom.</p>	Collectively devise strategies that can be used to increase participation in the classroom by decreasing student anxiety around participation.
5	Conclusion and Summary	<p>Summarize the key aspects of the workshop and discuss the strategies to keep in mind when instructing in their own classroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication apprehension/participation</li> </ul>	Summarize the workshop and provide a take home message- the strategies they can use in the classroom to decrease student participation anxiety.

		<p>anxiety results in low student participation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructors need to be aware of the causes of this anxiety to prevent it in their classroom.</li> <li>• Instructors can devise strategies that best suit their department to help reduce this anxiety in the classroom.</li> </ul>	
5	Question and Answer	<p>Respond to any questions or comments participants may have about participation and/or communication apprehension/participation anxiety and strategies to increase participation by decreasing anxiety.</p> <p>Invite participants to ask questions and provide comments about the benefits of student participation and communication apprehension/participation anxiety and how to prevent it as an instructor.</p>	Clarify any aspects of the workshop and provide input in the form of a comment.

### PRESENTATION STRATEGIES

The goal of the workshop is to increase awareness of communication/participation anxiety in the university classroom. This workshop can be applied to various disciplines and class sizes. This workshop has been prepared to allow for substantial discussion and interaction between the participants in small groups and as a large group. Because there is variation across cultures and disciplines, small and large groups are important. This format allows individuals from different fields to discuss the role of active participation in their discipline and the particular challenges they might face in their class when trying to use strategies to reduce student participation anxiety. This cross-collaboration often allows instructors to learn about approaches taken in other disciplines and by other instructors and apply these strategies in their own classroom.

The facilitator of the workshop will need to keep groups focused on the topic at hand during discussions and facilitate the large-group discussions. The facilitator will need to direct the participants to the video clip and the specific content to watch for. After the video clip, the facilitator will need to debrief and guide the students to make the link between the scene and their own experiences with participation anxiety. The facilitator will also need to employ the

didactic lecture approach to introduce concepts such as active participation and its benefits and what communication apprehension is and its causes.

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APPENDIX A: Handout

**Section A:  
Classroom Activities Involving Student Participation**

Place a check mark beside the student participation activities used in your classroom or a typical class in your discipline.

Brainstorming	
Debates	
i-clickers followed by Q & A or discussion	
Online discussion board	
Asking questions	
Large group discussion	
Small group discussion	
Peer explanations/peer teaching	
Poster presentations	
Individual presentations	
Group presentations	
Case studies followed by discussion	
Other	

**Section B:**

**Karim and Shah's (2012) Classroom Participation Anxiety Self-Report Scale**

*Karim and Shah (2012)*

	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree or disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
<b>I look forward to giving a presentation or assignment or project work to the whole class.</b>					
<b>I always feel relaxed and comfortable whenever I have to present my assignment or project work to the whole class.</b>					
<b>I will always choose courses in which there are many occasions for assignments and project work to be presented to the whole class.</b>					
<b>I will always ask and respond to any questions posed by my lecturer/teacher during class hours.</b>					
<b>I will always ask questions during class hours.</b>					

## Section C:

### Creating a Low-Anxiety Classroom Environment

*Strategies to reduce student participation anxiety adapted from Young (1991)*

1. Be aware of cultural differences (gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status)
  - Increased focus on the individual
  - Attend to social and cultural differences
2. Provide opportunities for student control
  - Provide students the opportunity to control some aspects of their participation experience
    - allow students to make participation a lower percentage of their grade
    - allow students to work with classmates they feel comfortable with
3. Build rapport
  - “Getting to know you” activities
  - Engage in out of classroom communication
  - Address students by name
  - Form class seats in circles or semi-circles
4. Instructor Immediacy
  - Nonverbal- Smiling, nodding, eye-contact, movement around classroom
  - Verbal- Asking students about themselves, acknowledge student responses positively, ask for student opinions
5. Support Competence
  - Provide positive feedback
  - Provide questions for discussion ahead of time so that students can reflect on them prior to class discussion
  - Ask questions that do not have correct answers but spark discussion



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