Proceedings

Conference 91, Spring 2021

The Official Journal of the Georgia Communication Association, Inc.

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February 18-19, 2022

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Proceedings, the official publication of the Georgia Communication Association, Inc., is an academic journal concerned with the study and improvement of teaching effectiveness in the fields of communication in secondary and post-secondary education. All sub-disciplines of the general discipline of communication are welcome.

The documents in this issue of *Proceedings* were presented at the 2021 GCA, Inc., Conference, which was held virtually on February 19 and 20, 2021.

In Memoriam

Thad Nifong, long-time editor of *Proceedings* and member of GCA, passed away on April 20. Here is his obituary as published by the Bainbridge, GA, *Post Searchlight* on April 27, 2021.

> Thaddeus (Thad) Beam Nifong, Lead Instructor of Speech & Communication at Gwinnett Technical College and life-long advocate, actor, and director of community theatre, died Tuesday, April 20th. He was 58. Born in Lakeland, Florida, Thad's hometown was Plant City, Florida with residency later established in Tallahassee, Florida; Bainbridge, Atlanta, and Tucker, Georgia.
>
> Thad earned his Bachelor of Science Degree from Florida State University and his Master of Communication Arts from Valdosta State University. Ever striving to further his education, he began his post-graduate courses in Master of Leadership & Organization at Troy University. He was a member of Toastmasters International and the Golden Key International Honor Society.
>
> Thad began his teaching career in speech and communications at Bainbridge College in Bainbridge, Georgia. He developed an immediate love for the classroom and especially enjoyed helping students who were disadvantaged or struggling. From there he took a position teaching speech and communications at Gwinnett Technical College, where he was a well-loved and inspiring instructor and the faculty lead for the school's Toastmasters International chapter.
>
> Throughout his life, Thad had a passion for theater and music. He was a founding board member for the Plant City Community Theatre (now called Plant City Entertainment, Inc.), he sang with the Warren Willis Singers, and he served in numerous church choirs in the cities where he has lived. Eventually, his passion for theater led him to the Bainbridge Little Theatre in Bainbridge, Georgia where he served as Theatre Manager, Director of numerous plays and musicals, and an unforgettable performer in several acclaimed productions. Most recently, his acting skills were showcased by way of several memorable character roles at the Main Street Theatre in Tucker, Georgia.
>
> Thad was also very well known for his love of animals, and he often spoke out against the abuse and mistreatment of them. Over the years, the beloved pets fortunate enough to have been in Thad's family, included Conrad, Spencer, Sherman, and Kiefer.
>
> With a larger-than-life personality and a deep and caring heart, Thad left an indelible mark on the thousands he met during his short life. He is often remembered for his bright smile, his unique humor, and his appreciation of flashy attire. His ability to catch people's attention gave him the inroads to extend to them his kindness and a few laughs. His unique charm gave him the ability to connect with people regardless of age, race, gender, or any other variables. Thad simply loved sharing his own story, while also celebrating what others had to share.
>
> Thad is preceded in death by his parents, Wanda Beam and Dwight Moody Nifong, Jr., both of Plant City, Florida. He is survived by his sister Krysta Diehl of Auburn, Alabama and a brother Simeon Nifong of Lake Placid, Florida, as well as three nephews, two nieces, and numerous great nephews and nieces.

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Mindfulness and Risk Communication during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Caitlin Wills is Associate Professor and Steven Shields is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, Media and Journalism (Public Relations Sequence) at the University of North Georgia
There were no grants or other assistance provided for this research.

One of the aims of risk management is to foresee, and to whatever extent possible forestall, risks that might lead to wide-spread crises. Several theories have been proposed over time about how to best manage risks at this level, including mindfulness theory; the use of high reliability organizations; the use of precautionary principles; cultural theories; and treatment of risk communication as a rhetorical argument among interested stakeholders (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) during spring 2020 offered an opportunity to examine the utility of these theories as the pandemic developed, grew deadly, and was responded to by federal and state governments. In particular, this study compares how mindfulness theory helps us understand both the planned response to the outbreak as well as the public's willingness to adhere to directives offered by those in authority as the pandemic began.

Background of project

At the urging of a senior scientist driven to put the "public" back in public health planning, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention embarked on a series of unprecedented public consultations focused on pandemic flu planning in 2006. These consultations were held to determine public acceptance of a series of mitigation measures, such as social distancing and vaccine prioritization that could be put into practice in the event of an actual pandemic.

The first of these projects, "The Public Engagement Project on Community Control Measures for Pandemic Influenza," focused on the topic of community distancing measures and engaged 260 citizens from four geographic regions to discuss and determine public support for implementation of the measures. Citizens recruited in Seattle, Washington; Syracuse, New York; Lincoln, Nebraska; and Atlanta, Georgia met in day-long deliberations where they were informed about the science of pandemic influenza and deliberated the efficacy of various measures of community control to slow or halt pandemic influenza transmission (Keystone Center, 2007). These community control measures included encouraging sick and non-ill contacts of sick persons to stay home, cancelling large gatherings, altering work patterns, and closing schools and large day care facilities.

These citizen meetings were followed by a meeting of organized stakeholders from affected sectors who also provided their input. The project had nine main goals, which focused on recruiting and educating citizen participants, facilitating diverse discussion producing useful public input for pandemic planning, and creating a process that is considered valuable to both participants and decision makers.

The project report concluded that participants represented "diverse interests and demographic characteristics, although certain groups appeared to be underrepresented" (Keystone Center, 2007, Appendix B, p. 5). The participant group skewed older 45-64 (59.3%) and White (74.7%), with a higher income ($30,000-$100,000, 57.2%) and education level (graduate school, 34.2%). Both the public and the stakeholders "expressed a high level of support for the five individual elements of the proposed package of control measures and for the package of five taken as a whole," at 64-70% (The Keystone Center, 2007, p. 3). Individually, 95% or more of both groups supported encouraging sick people to stay at home, cancelling large public gatherings, and altering work patterns.

Both groups also supported closing schools and large day care facilities and encouraging non-ill contacts of sick persons to stay at home at similar levels (83-84%). The citizens also identified four major categories of concern that they felt needed to be addressed for implementation of the measures to be successful. These included:

- coordinated and transparent planning involving communities, individuals, public officials, and employers,
- creating workplace policies to support the financial and family burdens that employees will experience,
- creating public information campaigns with straightforward and necessary information and messages that motivate the public to comply that are coordinated at all levels of government, and
- connecting community organizations and volunteers with people in need to ensure that information, services and social and psychological support are available during the pandemic.

The final project report warned “failure to implement [the] recommendations risks failure to mobilize the necessary people and resources when and where needed at the time of the actual pandemic, failure of citizens to comply with the recommendations, failure of citizens to understand what they need to do, and a missed opportunity to reduce the social harms caused by the control measures.” (The Keystone Center, 2007, p. 5). Evaluation of the project by the University of Nebraska concluded that the project had met its nine goals.

In summary, a large and diverse group of citizens were successfully recruited. Their knowledge of pandemic influenza increased. They participated in honest and balanced discussion and contributed meaningful information to the stakeholder group. In general, both stakeholders and the public were satisfied with the process and they believed their input would be seriously considered by policy makers. However, at the conclusion of the project, the report noted that “it is difficult to determine what impact the public engagement process had on official policy,” (Keystone Center, 2007, Appendix B, p. 7) although the “Interim Pre-pandemic Planning Guidance” produced by the CDC “directly” referenced the project several times.

Literature Review

According to Sellnow and Seeger (2013), risk is at the core of crisis management because crises can evolve from the mismanagement of a particular risk. All risk has some degree of uncertainty and the inability to address that uncertainty can lead to mismanagement and potentially crisis. Therefore, adequate crisis management involves recognizing, understanding, addressing, and communicating about the risk to avoid a crisis event. For this reason, Sellnow and Seeger (2013) argued that theories of risk communication were useful for understanding and analyzing crisis situations. He outlined five theories of risk communication “that clarify and explain the process, while providing recommendations for successfully navigating the complexities of proving the negative” (p. 190). One of these was mindfulness theory.

Langer (1989) developed the concept of a western style mindfulness in the discipline of psychology. Langer’s main argument was that “routines induce mindless action” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006, p. 516). Such mindlessness “occurs when we act from a single perspective and respond automatically to categories without recognizing what does not fit into our classification system” (Veil, 2011, p. 124). Mindlessness in organizations is created by the organization’s inability to consider past failures as learning opportunities, instead focusing only on successes. Routinizing and standardized procedures and systems can also lead to mindless behaviors within an organization (Veil, 2011). The problem with operating from a mindless perspective is especially problematic for high reliability organizations such as nuclear power plants and firefighting teams who deal with high levels of uncertainty and operations that demand a high level of functioning. Any potential misstep of the risk could end in crisis or failure for these organizations.

Mindfulness, in contrast, is the continual reclassification of experiences to interrupt routines from unfolding mindlessly (Veil, 2011, p. 135). Mindfulness occurs “when coded information is differentiated more fully and more creatively” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 134). According to Langer (1989), mindfulness involves three qualities: 1) creation of new categories, 2) openness to new information, and 3) an awareness of more than one perspective.

First, mindfulness involves the constant creation of new categories by “categorizing and re-categorizing, labeling and relabeling” (Langer, 1989, p. 65). Key to the creation of new categories is an awareness of the situation and the context.

Second, openness to new information means an openness “to cues, to another point of view” (p. 70). Finally, awareness of more than one perspective is the recognition that “every idea, person, or object is potentially simultaneously many things depending on the perspective from which it is viewed” (p. 71). Considering different perspectives gives people more choices on how to respond and makes change possible. In organizations, these qualities cause a “disruption” in relying on routine responses to people, processes, or potential problems faced by an organization.

Mindfulness “stirs the cognitive pot” (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006, p. 516), focuses attention on “what does not match our expectations” (Veil, 2011, p. 136) and opens up decision making to new ways of doing things.

According to Levinthal and Rerup (2006), organizational mindfulness involves two important qualities: first, “a sustained high level of sensitivity to errors, unexpected events, and, more generally, to subtle cues suggested by the organization’s environmental and its own processes; second, the capacity to engage in a flexible range of behaviors in order to respond effectively to this potentially diverse and changing set of stimuli” (p. 504).

Mindful organizations engage in detailed environmental scanning, searching for unique events, anomalies or warning signals (Barton, Sutcliffe, Vogus & DeWitt, 2015). Once recognized, these organizations approach the situation creatively, avoiding old routines, and make decisions discriminately (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006).

Adopting this type of mindful learning approach as part of the culture can cause organizations to better respond to uncertainty, and either avoid or respond to crises more appropriately to lessen its impact (Barton, Sutcliffe, Vogus, & DeWitt, 2015; Veil, 2011). However, in order for an organization to be mindful, mindfulness must be demonstrated across all hierarchical organizational sectors (Ray, Baker, & Plowman, 2011; Vendelø, 2020). Fragmentation among these units “challenges the level of organizational mindfulness and organization possesses” (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012, p. 730).

Since the concept of mindfulness began to be applied to organizational and crisis studies generally, the concept has narrowed to apply specifically to high reliability organizations, and attempts to create measurement scales have been conducted to determine to what degree an organization is mindful. Rather than testing new conceptualizations and measures here, this study followed Langer’s view of mindfulness to examine whether an organization engaged in mindful planning and activity makes accurate predictions. Research on the outcome of a mindful learning or planning approach is an area that is lacking (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2012; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006).

To summarize, mindfulness theory was considered the most useful for this study. The CDC’s 2006 public and stakeholder project was an exercise in mindful planning as Sellnow and Langer both describe it, and was thus the most appropriate theory to test against the public's actual responses to community control measures identified in the CDC discussions during an actual pandemic event.

Method

Because the results of the CDC's 2006 study were available for comparison, and because of the intrusion of the Coronavirus-19 into daily American life in March 2020, an online survey was conducted to gather data as efficaciously as possible as conditions were unfolding.

Participants (*n* = 803) were recruited via social media and generally represented similar demographics in terms of region, age, income, and education to the original project (see Table 1). Given the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic event, social media recruitment was deemed necessary to capture the data as quickly as possible.

Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with these control measure statements:

- I encourage sick persons to stay home for 14 days.
- I encourage non-ill contacts of sick persons to stay home for 14 days.
- I support closing schools and daycare facilities if necessary (for one, two, three or more months).
- I support altering work patterns if necessary (for one, two, three or more months).
- I support canceling large gatherings (for one, two, three or more months).

The percentage of participants who agreed and disagreed with the statements in this survey were then compared with those who supported and did not support the control measures in the original study. Different implementation lengths were discussed in breakout sessions during the meetings to ensure that participants understood the potential extent of implementation, but were not considered in voting during the meetings. However, in the 2020 survey, length of implementation was included in the questions to parse out more subtle differences that the original study did not detect.

Results

To compare the citizen responses from the 2006 project to the 2020 study, the 2020 surveys were grouped according to regional categories and compared to 3 of the four regions from the original 2006 project. These comparisons are not exact, both because of sample size and because of the way in which "regional differences" were finally pulled from the 2020 data.

During the 2006 study, participants were recruited from four cities: Atlanta, GA; Seattle, WA; Syracuse, NY; and Lincoln, NE. Because of the nature of online surveys, exact equivalents of these cities could not be gathered. Instead, each respondent's location data was extrapolated from their zip code area, and the zip codes themselves were used to determine regions that represented the Midwest, South, Northeast and Atlantic Coastal regions. These zip code regions were then used to compare responses from the cities of the 2006 study.

For example, the 2020 "Midwest" zip code region was used to compare the responses from Lincoln, NE. The "Southern" zip code region was used to compare responses from Atlanta, and the "Northeast" zip code region was used to compare responses from Syracuse, NY. There was no equivalent to the Seattle responses from the 2006 study, nor was there an analogue for the "Atlantic Coastal" zip code

region of the 2020 study. These were set aside from further analysis because of cultural and geographic dissimilarity.
As Table 2 illustrates, on a percentage basis, there was very close agreement between the 2006 and 2020 studies across the five responses used for the comparison.

A chi-square analysis of differences within regions between the 2006 and the 2020 studies was further undertaken, as was a chi-square analysis of the overall differences by region of the two studies. All analyses were converted to raw numbers from the percentages noted in Table 2.

A comparison of the 2006 findings and the 2020 findings in the “South”/Atlanta region showed no significant differences ($\chi^2 = 15.00$, df = 12, p = .241, n.s.).A comparison of the “Midwest”/Lincoln, NE responses was also non-significant ($\chi^2 = 10.00$, df = 8, p = .265, n.s.), as was a comparison of the “Northeast”/Syracuse, NY responses ($\chi^2 = 10.0$, df = 9, p = .35, n.s.).

A comparison of the 2006 and 2020 studies overall by region on the five responses was also non-significant ($\chi^2 = 135.0$, df = 130, p = .364, n.s.).

While the data did not allow exact comparisons, generally the initial planning done by the CDC in 2006 seemed to closely match the responses of the public during the actual pandemic in 2020, at least by geographic regions.

Other indicators of mindfulness

The 2006 project also produced 13 recommendations meant to address implementation concerns in areas of sound planning and preparation, economic support, access and clarity of information, and the availability of social services. The 2020 survey participants were also asked a series of questions modeled on these recommendations. These included such questions as to what degree respondents believed their employer had been transparent with them about the pandemic, and to what degree federal, state and local governments had been transparent. Further, had employers helped respondents bear financial costs or family burdens associated with the pandemic? Finally, had accurate and useful information been provided from public health officials or other government agents?

Responses to other indicators

Generally, respondents believed that employers (57.3 %) had provided accurate and useful information to them about their planning efforts and had acted transparently. Governments, however, were seen less favorably. Respondents strongly disagreed (34.1%) that the federal government had been forthcoming or transparent, while state governments were seen more favorably (39.2% strongly agreed) as were local governments (38%). Trusting business over government to properly respond to the pandemic is also reflected in the Edelman Trust Barometer Report (May 2020) with trust in business response at 56% and government at 48%.

Respondents generally believed that their employers had helped them bear the cost of the pandemic (strongly agree = 32.2%) as well as the family burden (strongly agree = 25.6%).

Some 86.4% agreed that necessary and accurate information was being provided by public health officials (strongly agree = 46.9%) and were the most trustworthy source of information (63.5%). Again, these officials were seen as more trustworthy than other federal officials (12.5%), state government officials (34.9%), or local government officials (21.9%). This high degree of trust in health officials as sources was also echoed in the 2020 and 2021 Edelman reports with trust in information from health officials at 63%.

Discussion

One of the responsibilities of government is to engage in planning for any number of current or perceived possible circumstances. In public health organizations such as the CDC, much of this planning is done behind closed doors with experts. Reports are compiled and completed with no input from the public who will be subjected to the policies and plans. However, in 2006 a senior scientist recognized that the experts did not have all of the answers, that a new threat was surfacing, and that different perspectives were needed as part of the planning process. This perspective and the resulting series of projects on topics relevant to other parts of the pandemic planning process (such as vaccine prioritization) show that the CDC was mindful in their approach to this risk. The fact that citizens felt the same in 2020 indicates that the organization's attempt to be mindful produced valid results and potentially could have helped them avoid a public health crisis.

In the case of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic, however, whatever mindful planning had been conducted was frustrated by the failure of the executive branch of government to heed the advice and planning of its own agencies, resulting instead in classic *mindlessness*.

In particular, then-President Donald Trump failed to act quickly at the initial discovery of the coronavirus. Trump then repeatedly ignored the best advice of his own top scientists, as well as recommendations by the CDC and others in the best practices to halt the spread of the coronavirus, in favor of advancing his own theories. At various points as the pandemic spread, Trump insisted on the efficacy of dubious practices such as medications meant for other diseases (hydroxychloroquine, as one example, used in the treatment of malaria), the ingestion of bleach, or simply the belief that the pandemic would suddenly vanish.

Trump further contradicted and confused public understanding by inserting himself in press conferences meant for medical scientists and experts in public health, such as Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Deborah Birx. Despite their efforts to provide public health guidance with science-based protocols, the President hovered on the stage nearby, alternately eager to claim the spotlight and at other times ominously regarding the presenters, much as a Soviet-style minder might have.

The Trump administration also slowed a unified and coordinated response to the pandemic by handing decision-making authority over the implementation of the control measures to the state governors, while at the same time arguing that the response of the Federal government was a coordinated and comprehensive approach (Project on Government Oversight, 2020). This same argument was heard later when a vaccine rollout was similarly claimed for political credit while mandating the states form their own plans for distribution and inoculation.

Finally, the administration repeatedly underfunded the pandemic response even while chief officers in the areas of health and trade stressed the need for more money and ignored recommendations made by the Government Accounting Officer to improve the response (Government Accounting Office, 2021).

In short, this inability or unwillingness of the federal government to make use of mindful planning resulted instead in *mindlessness*, the opposite approach to mindful planning. While government agencies tried to take a mindful approach in their response, the administration thwarted their effort. While "Operation Warp Speed" was put into motion in a desperate (but ultimately successful) search for a vaccine, the mindlessness of other facets of the federal government's response to the pandemic likely contributed to the deaths of thousands of American citizens.

This confusion and uncertainty among the public from the executive branch in all likelihood contributed to the United States having not only a disproportionately higher death toll, it also failed to halt the spread of the pandemic (Government Accounting Office, 2021). Had there been a consistent, reasoned and mindful approach to the public's understanding of how the virus was being spread and what measures were or were not efficacious, the virus may have been contained more quickly and various ineffective responses banished faster (for example, washing groceries or other products delivered from outside the home was done early in the spring of 2020 before it became understood that the virus did not linger on surfaces in that way).

Ultimately, this study reinforces the utility of government organizations taking a mindful approach in planning for risk situations, in this instance to contain an outbreak of a potentially dangerous threat to the public's health. Mindful planning is a preferred approach to such dilemmas and should be embraced in other instances. However, mindfulness needs to continue through planning to response to be effective. That the lead administration performed mindlessly and did not adapt and respond to different perspectives and new information and act accordingly is one of the legacies of this pandemic episode.

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Table 1
Comparison Percentages of 2020 Participant Demographics to 2006 Participant Demographics

			2020 Respondents	2006 Meeting	
Age	18-24		8.8	6.5	
	25-34		8.7	8	
	35-44		15.6	17.6	
	45-54		40	31.2	
	55-64		15.2	28.1	
	65+		11.5	8.5	
Gender	Male			35.7	
	Female			64.3	
Race/ Ethnicity	Hispanic White		6.1	4	
	Hispanic Black		0	0.5	
	White		89.3	74.7	
	Black		1.3	12.6	
	Asian		0.6	3	
	Native American		0	1.5	
	Other		2.7	3.5	
Education	Less than High School		0	0	
	Some High School		0.3	0.5	
	High School Graduate		3.6	4.5	
	Some college		18.4	22.1	
	College graduate		31.8	29.1	
	Some graduate school		6.7	9.5	
	Graduate school graduate		38.7	34.2	
Income	$15,000 or less		7.8	8.2	
	$15,001 - $30,000		9.4	8.8	
	$30,001 - $60,000		23.7	29.4	
	$60,001 - $100,000		24.4	27.8	
	$100,001 or more		34.8	25.8	

Table 2

Comparison of 2006 and 2020 regional responses to community control measures

Control Measures	*2020 Study Midwest N = 374*	*2006 Study Lincoln NE N=34*	*2020 Study South N = 253*	*2006 Study Atlanta GA N=84*	*2020 Study Northeast N = 22*	*2006 Study Syracuse NY N=75*
Encouraging sick persons to stay home	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Encouraging non-ill contacts to stay home	89%	92%	94%	82%	96%	82%
Canceling large public gatherings for one month	93%	100%	96%	100%	95%	99%
Closing schools and daycare facilities for one month	93%	96%	93%	78%	89%	82%
Altering work patterns for one month	93%	96%	94%	95%	95%	96%

Rural and Urban Divides During COVID Teaching

Dr. Nick J. Sciullo, Assistant Professor of Communications, Texas A&M University – Kingsville

Teaching during COVID-19 has raised a host of issues related to accessing learning and knowledge of educational technology tools. Synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid teaching models all concern access to the technological tools and knowledge needed to participate in virtual learning environments. Yet, technology is not as widely adopted nor available as official pronouncements may indicate, and that is increasingly obvious if one teaches students who live in rural areas. It is important at the outset to acknowledge that experiences of our students vary as do our own. While there may be some national trends, every region, state, county, and college or university is different. What might be true one place or with one class, may not be true at another place or even with a class in the same institution. If we are really to address technology concerns and their impact on our students' learning, we need to have honest and empathetic conversations with our students.

COVID-19's impacts have been uniquely felt in rural America (Wilson, 2020), which has no doubt amplified problems related to educational opportunity. Students in rural America may experience many problems in their attempts to attend college, and their experiences there can also be difficult. These range from bias against rural-living students (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017), inadequate support networks, poor high school academic standards, unprepared high school counselors, driving distance to a college or university, economic difficulties in paying for classes and materials, and a range of other issues. It is also important to remember that rural America is not only the Midwest or Deep South, but expands throughout the country.

Rising cases, the pandemic trending positively around the United States, and impacts felt individually and collectively all contribute to rural counties experiencing alarming COVID-19 struggles, yet the stories of these residents are often not being told (Ajilore, 2020). Unfortunately, "ruralism," a belief in the inferiority of rural areas and rural-living people, as well as lack of access to health care, has made it difficult to respond to the Coronavirus in rural areas (Parshley, 2020). Rural America is often ignored, and when a global pandemic is occurring, the troubling way many people regard rural America amplifies the negative effects of the pandemic. The pandemic occurs, however, at the very same time that many rural Americans are attempting to attend colleges and universities.

While many educators and university systems promote the idea that students and universities are well-situated to take up the challenge of online learning, the results for many teachers indicate the opposite (Mitchell, 2020). Talk at the water cooler or text one's colleague and the experiences of teachers at all grade levels seems much different. Educators know their students are struggling. *The Washington Post* reported on March 16, 2020 that students in rural areas, as well as teachers and administrators, are experiencing a technology crisis as well as a public health crisis (Romm, 2020). Teachers around the country are experiencing the digital divide (Romm, 2020). Furthermore, although polls widely tout enthusiasm for technology in the classroom there is spotty evidence that technology is making education more effective (Wexler, 2019). But, that issue is not the focus of this paper.

There is a seeming divide between the often urban-centric pronouncements of many university personnel (particularly those in urban areas as well as those with high research standing regardless of location). Those spokespersons claim that students are able to access online resources, use online systems, and succeed with online learning while the experience of many teachers in rural areas suggests a lack on digital fluency, poor Internet access, and low bandwidth as more indicative of their students' experiences in online education. Indeed, disparities in knowledge about digital technology and the diffusion of those technologies has been widely documented (Nguyen, Hargittai, & Marler, 2021).

Furthermore, we know that access to higher education flows urban (Johnson, 2019). This includes proximity to higher education, and also knowledge of higher education opportunities. McNamee, Willis, Ganss, Ardoin, and Sansone (2020) stated: “One-fourth of rural citizens lack access to broadband Internet” (n.p.). That is an alarming number especially for those of us teaching rural-living students, and COVID-19 has forced many to rely more heavily on technology to deliver any (meaningful) educational experiences. Researchers have also noted that colleges and universities often fail to understand the rural environment, which has been highlighted for many teachers during COVID-19 (McNamee, Willis, Ganss, Ardoin, & Sansone, 2020). This means our rural-living students may be intentionally or unintentionally excluded from opportunities in higher education. And, there may be little knowledge of this exclusion nor desire to change it.

The digital divide is not only a problem for K-12 students, but also for college students (Gonzales, McCrory Calarco, & Lynch, 2020). The problems with technology run the gamut of poor bandwidth, broken hardware, connectivity, data limits, and more (Gonzales, McCrory Calarco, & Lynch, 2020). One need only check one’s inbox for emails from students for proof of the digital divide. The negative impacts of the digital divide during the pandemic have been researched and supported by evidence from South Africa (Mpungose, 2020), Italy (Agasisti &Soncin, 2020), and Cameroon (Béché, 2020) at least.

Yet, many instructors still hold on to facile notions of digital nativity and ease of access. I remember as an early Ph.D. student talking with a Ph.D. student from another department at my University about the trouble my students had using discussion boards and email. This did not strike me as particularly odd, but it was frustrating. My graduate student compatriot told me that these students were digital natives, a concept I had never heard of before, and strongly suggested they were lying to me about their technology struggles. This concept struck me as odd given wide public discussion about difficulties people had getting reliable Internet access, cell phone service, and the expensiveness of laptop computers. But, I nodded along knowingly because that is what one does in graduate school. I would later research digital nativity using my expensive laptop and steady Internet connection, and realized that my colleague was quite wrong about digital nativity. Even in the early 2010s, scholars and writers were calling the concept into question with ample evidence from their teaching, working, and living (Jones & Shao, 2011). Digital nativity is now even more widely studied, and more widely regarded as a myth (Eynon, 2020; Scharton, 2018; Kirschner & DeBruyckere, 2017). But, I remained troubled that someone who was teaching students and would seemingly go on to teach more students after graduation was convinced that all students knew how to use technology and implicitly that they had access to it. If teachers did not know this was wrong then, COVID-19 has surely drawn their attention to the digital divide and how flawed the concept of digital nativity is now. Judd (2018) argued:

> Large-scale surveys of students’ adoption and use of various technologies clearly established that while some students appeared to fit the profile [of digital nativity] (or something like it), many did not, and that there was considerable variation in the level of technology adoption across student populations. (p. 99)

The story is much more complicated than teachers may realize. Even the notion of a gap between teachers and students was met with considerable criticism (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, &Krause, 2008). Of course, many instructors will often experience the difficulties students have using email, while at the same time remember using email themselves when in college 20 years ago with few problems. This argument defending a lack of technology fluency is not intended to diminish the frustration teachers no doubt feel, and often rightfully so, but rather to correct sweeping statements about what college students should know or about what they should have experienced. The so-called digital natives are also not necessarily better at technology use nor fluency than digital immigrants (McNaught, Lam, & Ho, 2009). Being born in the last 20 years simply does not translate into better fluency with technology.

Educators must realize that fluency in Facebook and Instagram is not the same as, and not necessarily transferable to, fluency in Blackboard, Moodle, and Zoom. Indeed, many students do not understand social media knowledge and use as having any bearing on education (Judd, 2018). This, combined with the use of the Internet for entertainment and not educational pursuits (Yong, Gates, & Harrison, 2016), suggests that even if digital nativity is to be believed, it must be substantially altered and questioned given the range of activities in which students may or may not be participating. Put another way: I am fairly able to wire a car stereo, but I should not be allowed to touch my engine. Similar knowledges are not always so similar and not always transferable.

Furthermore, while students might report the ability to access the Internet, these students often misrepresent connectivity by mistaking cellular data connectivity with Internet connectivity. Others still forget that they lose access when they go home, or that their connection may be relatively stable but that they only have one device shared among family members that can access the Internet. It can be embarrassing to lack Internet access or to experience technological illiteracy (Khazan, 2020), so teachers ought to suspect that these issues are underreported. Instructors must treat these relatively few reports about Internet difficulties critically because they may not demonstrate the whole story.

There are ways to bridge this divide including asynchronous and low-tech learning options for rural-living students who confront technological difficulties. Instructors might consider asynchronous learning as opposed to synchronous learning. While asynchronous learning presents its own challenges, it also gives students the option to connect when they can, to download videos of lectures and discussions, and ultimately to manage their learning given technological constraints. When using asynchronous learning, it is also important that instructors record shorter videos, use lower resolution on these videos, and provide transcripts for students who might not be able to load the videos despite their earnest attempts. Instructors might also consider avoiding videos and instead relying more heavily on Wikispaces, blogs, and message boards. While these tools are not as trendy nor as engaging, a message board that can be read is far more engaging than a video that cannot be downloaded or streamed.

Lastly, instructors should provide books and resources that are easily accessible for students with technology difficulties. This means making sure that there are both paper copies and digital copies of books available. It also means providing worksheets, syllabi, and other instructional material in Word documents, which tend to be smaller files than their PDF equivalents. Instructors should also leave copies of these documents on campus in case students remain on campus or have the opportunity to visit in order to avoid the technology troubles they may have at home. It is impossible to foresee all technological difficulties our students may encounter, but a little planning can go a long way to addressing them.

There is no one solution to technological difficulties experienced by rural students, but teachers can help. While it is certainly true that many instructors are overworked and may have their own technological difficulties, even moderate help to students experiencing the digital divide should make distance education easier and less stressful for students and instructors alike. Teachers must think critically about technology use and access during COVID-19, if we were not before, because it is exposing us to the difficulties we have often overlooked, particularly in rural America, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the future, as online learning continues to become more common, and online learning options remain after the pandemic, thinking about rural-living students and Internet difficulties will be important for all teachers at all learning institutions.

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Prepare Students in American Secondary Education to be Informed Citizens: Mandating Journalism Education and Protecting Student First Amendment Rights

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The role of student journalism has traveled a long and winding road, and it evolves more rapidly than the justice system can handle. It can teach, at an early age, how to responsibly engage in intelligent political debate and embrace the free marketplace of ideas. Otherwise, students are constantly living under a cloud of false security, perpetuated by the American education system.

Millennials and Generation Z have grown up in the era of laptops and cell phones and are reluctant to participate in political and civic organizations (Berenson, 2008). They also test poorly in their knowledge of civics and history. One study found that college seniors failed a test focusing on U.S. history, government, and economy (Berenson, 2008). However, other studies have shown that students with experience in journalism have higher grade-point averages in high school and college, have higher ACT scores, and perform better in college overall (Mitchell, 2008).

The problem with enforcing student First Amendment rights in high school begins with the school leaders who are just not convinced of the value of incorporating the First Amendment into their school cultures (Mitchell, 2008). Journalism teachers and media advisers who try to do that find themselves "locked in battle with their bosses" (Mitchell, 2008, p.26). But principals who have embraced First Amendment rights in their high schools have enabled students to experience the power of government and learn a value they take with them in life (Hoder, 2009).

Advancements in technology enable student journalists to better reach their audience, but it comes with restrictions on the very technology that has propelled journalism into the digital age. Filters imposed by school districts ultimately put limitations on education and possibly human rights (Malcolm, 2000). The United Nations showed that freedom of expression and the right to receive information is a human right when it drafted Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (The United Nations, 1948). Student journalists want equal access to information on school computers, without filtering software, to have equal educational opportunities (Malcolm, 2000). In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled in Board of Education v. Pico that students have the right to receive ideas and information to exercise their own rights of speech, press, and political freedom (Smith, 2013). However, the Children's Internet Protection Act of 2000 created limitations on access to information. Whether people have a right to receive information has been debated in public schools and in public libraries ever since filtering software associated with the Children's Internet Protection Act was argued to be an abridgement of an adult patron's constitutional rights. The Supreme Court decided the Act is not such a violation (*United States v. American Library Association*, 2003).

Literature Review

The prohibition of Congress to abridge freedom of speech is not absolute as the Supreme Court limits First Amendment protection for students' expression within the confines of public schools (Hersh, 2013). The existing precedent has not kept up with the rapidly changing nature of communication in the digital age (Hersh, 2013). If the five freedoms derived from the First Amendment are designed to ensure "equal protection of the law" to all persons within the United States, then it should include students as well (U.S. Const. amend. XIV). The Supreme Court has stated that students "are possessed of fundamental rights which the State must respect, just as they themselves must respect their obligations to the State" (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Dist.*, 1969). This reciprocal conditioning has played out in numerous Supreme Court cases regarding protected speech.

In merely forty-five words, the cornerstone of a free and democratic society declares that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" (U.S. Const. amend. I). However, the prohibition of Congress from abridging the freedom of speech is not absolute as the Supreme Court limits First Amendment protection for students' expression within the confines of public schools (Hersh, 2013).

Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District

In Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, Justice Fortas stated that "[i]t can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolyard gate" (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Dist.*, 1969). Students who wore black armbands to school as a silent protest of the Vietnam War were suspended when they refused to remove them. Though the Supreme Court gave school officials the right to maintain order and control in schools, it declared that such a symbolic gesture did not impose disruptive conduct and is a form of "pure speech" entitled protection under the First Amendment. The Court declared that students are "persons" as defined in the Constitution and do not lose their constitutional rights in school; however, school officials do reserve the right to maintain order and control in schools (Golub, 1988).

Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser

Bethel challenged the freedoms established in Tinker when the Supreme Court ruled that schools can punish students who use vulgar language during school-sponsored events (*Bethel School Dist. No. 403 v. Fraser*, 1986). A student was suspended for violating the school's policy that prohibited the use of obscene language in school. Unlike the students' political speech in *Tinker*, this lewd and indecent speech was unrelated to any political viewpoint, and the Court upheld the school officials' decision to discipline the student.

Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier

The Supreme Court ruled in Hazelwood that school officials may regulate student expression rather than punish students for expression (*Hazelwood School Dist. v. Kuhlmeier*, 1988). A high school principal insisted two articles on sensitive topics be deleted from the school newspaper. The Court concluded that a school newspaper is not a public forum and distinguished whether a school tolerates particular student speech—as in *Tinker*—or affirmatively promotes particular student speech.

Morse v. Frederick

And in *Morse*, a principal suspended a student for refusing to put away a banner that read "BONG HiTS 4 JESUS" as the Olympic Torch Relay for the Winter Games passed through Juneau, Alaska, because it violated the school's policy prohibiting the encouragement of illegal drug use (*Morse v. Frederick*, 2007). The Court concluded that those policies do not violate students' free speech rights.

Journalism as enrichment

Before *Tinker*, the Supreme Court determined that students cannot be punished for not saluting the American flag (*West Virginia State Bd. of Ed. v. Barnette*, 1943). It emphasized the importance of educating students of the Bill of Rights and suggested that educators should not limit students by just teaching civics but should encourage students to practice it as well. Justice Jackson said educators should not “strangle the free mind at its source and teach youth to discount important principles of our government as mere platitudes” (*West Virginia State Bd. of Ed. v. Barnette*, 1943, p. 627). Civil liberties are not abstract thoughts limited to the pages of textbooks.

Some school leaders agree that journalism classes offer students more than just learning and understanding First Amendment rights. Journalism education “fuels academic growth, fosters community understanding, and leads to tangible skills development” (Stapp, 2013, p. 30). In addition to addressing the emphasis on nonfiction text in Common Core Standards, journalism classes help students earn better grades in high school, achieve higher scores on the ACT, and perform better than non-journalism peers as college freshmen, according to a 2008 study by the Newspaper Association of America Foundation (Stapp, 2013). An examination of a subset of the ACT data focusing on minorities found that minority students with high school journalism backgrounds, when compared to their non-journalism counterparts, had significantly better high school grades in six of seven areas of academic comparison, as well as significantly higher ACT scores in language arts and collegiate first English course grades (Dvorak et al., 2009).

Scholastic journalism

Scholastic journalism programs teach “duty, honor, and professional responsibility—key components to a civic education in a democratic society” (Stapp, 2013, p. 31). Successful school newspapers in the new millennium have educators who champion free speech and take on controversial topics such gay teens, drug use, and race. Journalism education fuels academic growth, fosters community understanding, and leads to tangible skills development. Dedicated student journalists in such programs show skills needed in the workplace and have qualities equivalent to professional standards, such as a willingness to share information, commitment to deadlines and teamwork, curiosity, and competency in writing and other expressions (Stapp, 2013).

Media literacy

Media literacy offers students critical thinking skills; however, it is not a course offered in American secondary schools because they devote little attention to the systematic study of the media, even though the citizens of the U.S. consume more T.V. than any other country (Tuggle et al., 1999). Media literacy is an added benefit that goes beyond higher test scores and knowledge of First Amendment rights. It teaches students how to analyze media messages, detect bias in the media, and recognize propaganda in the media.

Media literacy is described as the study of various media in order to encode and decode messages being conveyed in advertising and pop culture. The Center for Media Literacy noted a basic but common definition offered by participants of the 1992 Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms (*Media Literacy: A Definition and More* 2010). However, as society evolves and adapts to 21st century media culture, the definition of media literacy has expanded to include the importance of the education of students who have easily adapted to this new media culture:

> Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. (*Media Literacy: A Definition and More* 2010)

Fear of the Unknown

The key to achieving such positive educational results from students is getting high school administrators on board with First Amendment education. A Knight Foundation survey found that only a quarter of the principals questioned thought student should be able to publish media freely (Mitchell, 2008). Censorship of the student press "stems from fear" (Stapp, 2013). Getting principals to enroll in the First Amendment programs is challenging because the view among many administrators is that giving student journalists the power to make content decisions will only breed chaos and controversy (Mitchell, 2008).

In *Tinker*, school officials feared a disturbance from wearing armbands; however, fear of disturbance is not enough to overcome the right to freedom of expression (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Dist*., 1969). Justice Brandeis described the asymmetry in justifying suppression of speech in the name of fear as "hazardous to discourage thought, hope and imagination;" fear breeds repression, which breeds hate, which menaces stable government (*Whitney v. California*, 1927, p. 375). To combat the fear of what students will say and read in student publications, some principals embrace and support the exercise of free speech by getting educated in the topic.

Journalism in Cyberspace

The Internet has changed the way students express themselves and communicate with one another and serves as a gateway to the "marketplace of ideas" for students, whether they use it for constructive ideas or less virtuous purposes (Hersh, 2003, p. 1317; Floyd, 2014). Changes in the media industry have journalists depending more and more on social media, which have altered its interface to be more user friendly for journalists (Auxier, 2012). High school journalists can model the social media curriculum as a way to make the best practices for a journalistic tool.

The legal battles that have been waged over whether off-campus online student speech can be regulated have not reached the Supreme Court until spring of 2021 and that case (*Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L.*) has not been decided as of this publication date. Applying precedent that predates advances in communication technology to cases that struggle with boundaries with no geographical distinction has become confusing and a struggle for lower courts (Hersh, 2013; Hoder, 2009). Critics argue that there is a need for the Supreme Court to designate the Internet as a new type of forum, "a metaphysical public forum" (Smith, 2013, p. 64). The problem arises when online expression begins to infringe on another person's rights such as criticizing school officials or cyberbullying. A school that ignores this problem has failed in its ability to maintain a safe learning environment (Willard, 2013). By remaining silent, the Supreme Court has created "chaos in the lower courts' adjudication of online student speech cases," which has left schools to deal with disruptive speech without legal guidance (Willard, 2013, p. 316-317).

Without proper precedent or standards to apply to these online-expression cases, lower courts have "applied differing standards, invoked inconsistent reasoning, and reached incompatible results in student online-expression cases" (Hersh, 2013, p. 1313). Other legal reasons why schools are becoming more involved with students' online expression includes new laws and societal pressure, as well as the undeveloped limits on school jurisdiction over students' online activity (Hoder, 2009).

Method

Review of the literature has shown that student speech and expression precedent set in *Tinker*, and subsequent precedent in *Fraser* and *Hazelwood*, is in need of modernization. The Internet has changed the way people—especially students—communicate with one another, so it is only natural the method and mode of free speech and expression have altered how the legal system addresses these issues. Currently, those decisions are in the many hands of the lower courts. The Supreme Court has intentionally denied certiorari to cases revolving around student-speech on the Internet because the standards in place now fail to apply to the complexities of an entity that has no boundaries or designated jurisdiction. Laws regarding the protection of student free speech and expression are in need of changing with the rapidly changing nature of communication technology.

There are three research questions that will be explored: (1) Why should school officials embrace and encourage journalism students to exercise their First Amendments rights? (2) How does student journalism experience in high school translate into better prepared citizens of a democratic society? (3) Why should journalism education be a mandatory course for high school students?

Educational Acceptance

Why should school officials embrace and encourage journalism students to exercise their First Amendments rights? The answer is to foster an atmosphere of comfort among students where knowledge can bloom. School districts that invest in journalism programs, both print and broadcast, are aligning with educational values that emphasize nonfiction text in Common Core State Standards (Stapp, 2013). Superintendents around the nation are offering guidance and leadership in areas of financial and legislative support of journalism classes. Ten states have passed student press rights legislation. However, a study in Florida found that principals who are critics of student press rights believe First Amendment protection should be respected so long as “those rights are not being exercised by students during school hours” (Martinson & Kopenhaver, 1992, p.160). The data suggested that superintendents are not vigorous supporters of a free student press as long as the school board funds the programs, and school administrators should have editorial control over student papers (Martinson & Kopenhaver, 1992). The problem posed by this practice of prior restraint is that these school boards may not have sufficient journalism education to make informed journalistic editorial decisions.

The Supreme Court has expressed that allowing school officials to run public schools as “enclaves of totalitarianism” because student speech is incompatible with the school's pedagogical message would “strangle the free mind at its source” (*Hazelwood School Dist. v. Kuhlmeier*, 1988, p. 280). Justice Fortas stated in *Tinker* that students may not be regarded as “closed-circuit recipients” of whatever the State chooses to communicate or be confined to expression of what is officially approved by a school board (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Dist*., 1969, p. 511). However, the post-*Tinker* Court has systematically fettered students’ right to freedom of speech and expression to the point that it has denied certiorari to subsequent student-speech cases since *Morse*, ultimately missing the opportunity to address its shortcomings in student-speech precedent (Weeks, 2011). High school students have seen their First Amendment rights thrown back over Tinker’s schoolyard gate.

Preparing Future Citizens

School officials should embrace and encourage journalism students to exercise their First Amendment rights in school because the experience prepares them to be responsible and informed citizens of a democratic society. Studies have revealed the downward spiral of American civic literacy and engagement among citizens, including college students and elected officials (Folami, 2012). Historically, the American public relied on professional journalists to further America's self-governing democracy, but some viewers have gradually abandoned their reliance on broadcast journalism as a political knowledge source and have become “news grazers of motley information sources and mediums” (Wojcicki, 2010, p. 52). Journalism education enables them to become more aware of current events and provides students hands-on experience with the creation of media messages. Participating in the creation of media for an audience beyond the classroom “works to validate students’ identities as valuable members of society who have something to say and deserve to be heard” (Share, 2007, p. 21).

Wojcicki (2010) illustrated how high school journalism programs are not teaching rhetoric or hyperbole, including Palo Alto High School. It encourages its student journalists to write stories that have a profound impact on the community—some of which have resulted in multiple resignations of school district officials, including the superintendent. Students learn by doing, not by watching, so the Supreme Court decisions on student free speech need to prevent the First Amendment from existing in principle only and not in fact (Jorgensen, 2009).

Encouragement from educators to students to get an education is riddled with duplicity. With their one-track mindset of offering courses geared toward college prep, school officials are missing the mark if the mission is to prepare students for the real world. Television personality Mike Rowe, a staunch advocate for strong work ethics, commenting on whether politicians should have a college degree, claimed Americans have confused qualifications with competency and noted that a trillion dollars of student loans and a massive skills gap are precisely what happens to a society that actively promotes one form of education as the best course for most people (Rowe, 2015).

If students are unable to practice skills learned in school by applying them to personal experiences, then what does "education" mean? School officials who create an environment that stifles individualism and civil liberties are embracing only the "theory" of education (Folami, 2012). If students are not given opportunities to make connections between theory and practice, education has failed. Educators who push students to achieve in order to continue their "education" in college are setting up some students for failure if those students do not achieve the "success" of moving on to higher education. To avoid depending on the media for political discourse, students should be required to learn journalistic attributes and be allowed to practice it in a way consistent with how it is practiced outside of the classroom.

Required Journalism

Educators have a responsibility to prepare students for their place in society engaging in innovative technological advances in communication, not a retrograde society steeped in previous decades' technology. Journalism as a required social science course would avoid the professionalization of the industry with the purpose to equip students with skills needed to engage in a technologically advanced society in which communications methods can form and reform throughout a student's high school career. Just as English, math, science, history, and economics are designed to develop strengths in those areas that affect everyday life, required journalism education should be approached as a combined English and career and technical education course to include aspects that touch upon civil rights, media literacy, graphic design, social media, and media technology in addition to skills already incorporated such as non-fiction reading and writing, and career work ethics.

George (2011) argued that preparing students for careers in news organizations should no longer be the preeminent goal of college journalism programs. Practical journalism education should include semi-professional and non-professional forms because an increasing amount of journalism—and what looks like journalism—is being practiced outside of professional news organizations (George, 2011). Journalism education that encourages professionalization is counterproductive and appears to have created an elitist class in which "social status, professional and educational pedigree" determine who can and cannot distribute or broadcast political discourse (Folami, 2012, p. 495).

Folami (2012) explained that "the average person" who engages in this discourse is lending to the democratization of information and should be encouraged (p. 504). However, Folami recognized citizen journalism should not be the sole arbiter of political news and a citizen journalist who posts untrue or unverified stories should not be considered a professional journalist. George (2011), on the other hand, discussed journalism as a human right, as inspired by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "everyone" has the right to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas" (p. 259). Focusing on who the journalist is, rather than the content of what is published, will take a great deal of transformation in secondary education.

Conclusion

The First Amendment does not provide an absolute guarantee of free speech rights, especially for students (Weeks, 2011). From the Vietnam era to the new millennium, the Supreme Court has eschewed its own precedent that once supported student free speech on school campuses. Until the Supreme Court hears an Internet-based student-speech case, Tinker's schoolyard gate will remain closed, and any conclusions about how to handle modern communication technology will not happen any time soon.

The freedom of speech clause and the freedom of press clause refer to two different ideas, all citizens are entitled to free speech, but the press is free to publicize it to the masses. However, citizen journalism has put the capability of "the press" in every American's hands with a mobile device or a personal computer with an Internet connection. The widespread use of this method of communicating has flourished well beyond the imagination of the judicial sages.

Allowing students to experience practical journalism lends to the complications presented by First Amendment freedom of speech in the 21st century, which have school officials wavering between providing an education that will propel students into responsible citizenship and their right to maintain control over students' actions within schools. The rapid advancement in communication technology is another complication in student-speech that neither school officials nor the judicial system is capable of handling. The No Child Left Behind Act has embraced vital goals for the new Information Age, but schools lack the capacity to do what is necessary to substantially reach the goals (Levick & Schwartz, 2007).

Schools need to implement more technology into the curriculum as a requirement, and students should be challenged to design and create media. A redesigned, modern journalism course would give students the best of many worlds including reading, writing, and analyzing non-fiction content, blogging, micro-blogging, designing interactive media, entrepreneurship, and, most of all, the freedom to express themselves without fear of reprisal. Journalism education needs to be redefined to divest from the idea that students enrolled in the course intend on pursuing a career in that field, and school officials should embrace that idea by making necessary curriculum choices at the high school level that are geared toward positive life choices "if the goal is really to leave no child behind" (Gray, 2004, p. 128).

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Mindset Theory and Practice and the Basic Public Speaking Course

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In 2021, higher education faculty have been bombarded with a number of calls for professional development in some new and old topics. These topics include designing online teaching on the fly, shifting to use of technology to accommodate the safety rules needed in a pandemic, and dealing with traumatized students who have lost jobs, family members, and their expectations for the present and future. But one topic that was becoming prominent before March of 2020 is still around, and it continues to perplex, fascinate, frustrate, and promise: Mindset Theory or Mindset Approach.

It is safe to say there are some misconceptions about Mindset Theory. First, it's not an attitude. It might affect attitude, but Mindset Theory is about beliefs. Second, it is not a generalized idea about "I can be successful in college" (that's self-confidence) or "I can do math or public speaking well" (that fits under Albert Bandura's theory of self-efficacy) (2010). It is not self-esteem, or locus of control, or even motivation. All of these constructs or theories touch upon, overlap, and intersect with Mindset Theory, but they are not the same entity. (For purposes of clarification, this article capitalizes Mindset Theory to distinguish it from colloquial uses of "mindset" for attitude or life perspectives, since Carol Dweck and her colleagues' use of the term is very specific.)

Misconceptions about Mindset Theory

Common misconceptions about Mindset Theory can be found even in some scholarly literature, in the sense that it is broadened to include more than what Dweck and colleagues mean by the terms. Mindset is, according to Yeager and Dweck, "implicit theories about personal attributes that guide individuals in making predictions and judging the meaning of events in one's world" (2012, p. 303). That definition from the scholars behind Mindset Theory may surprise us. What we may have heard are the terms "growth" and "fixed" mindset. Growth mindset (incremental theory) is the belief that intelligence is a malleable quality that can be cultivated (by effort, correct learning strategies, etc.), not a fixed trait. Fixed mindset (entity theory) is the belief that intelligence is stable and not changeable in a significant way (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

However, some writers expand the concept to mean "psycho-social attitudes that a student has about him or herself in relation to academic work" and include "a sense of belonging to an academic community, a belief that ability and competence grows with effort, confidence in the ability to learn and shape their future, valuing effort, and a sense that the academic work has personal value and meaning" (Mills & Mills, 2018, p. 1046). These expansions muddy the waters and might weaken the claims of the original theory, which is based on progress in neurological science and understanding brain plasticity and neuronal networks. The theory posits that if students understand that intelligence is not a fixed trait, but realize instead that it is at least partially a product of effort that the brain undergoes in grappling with new material, then they will develop a different set of beliefs about their own intelligence and their ability to learn and succeed.

While the mislabeling of various student attitudes and behaviors or general self-confidence as "Mindset" distorts Dweck's original Mindset Theory, it does uncover a tendency in higher education to get excited about the "next new thing." However, we know from experience that one particular theory is not the "silver bullet" to student academic success (forgive the gun metaphor). We are complex beings living and learning in a complex system, and most of us have been involved in education for many,

many years, in different roles. We might have a justified sense that one theory may contribute greatly to student success, but we might also be suspicious that it will revolutionize higher education. Yet some of the messaging regarding Mindset Theory seems to do just that.

Mindset Theory in Educational Practice

The promise of Mindset Theory, if a theory can have a promise, is that students with growth mindset will work towards mastery in learning rather than performance (a grade). They will seek resources, understand "failure" is temporary and surmountable, ask for help, and be resilient. Interventions that alter the students' mindsets can be introduced into the classroom. Finally, alteration in the students' mindset will lead to higher achievement. Research also points to the likelihood that low-income and first generation students benefit more from such interventions (Yeager et al., 2019).

On the other hand, those with a "fixed" mindset will see intelligence as a "zero-sum" game. In "fixed mindset thinking," the individual only has so much intelligence; they can learn some skills but cannot become more intelligent and cannot become significantly more skilled in an area in which do not have innate talent. In short, one is either good in math, or not really; one who is not good in math can learn to a certain point but their fixed belief about intelligence—in general and their own—will hold them back from success. Worse, when faced with failure in learning, such as earning a 45 on a required College Algebra test, the "fixed mindset" student does not have the resilience and will not look for resources or develop strategies to improve. They are stuck due to their beliefs about intelligence.

Of course, all this would be moot if research into brain anatomy and physiology did not prove that intelligence *is* malleable. If that were not true, beliefs would be irrelevant; a conviction that intelligence is malleable, absent of evidence, would not make it true. That is the strength of Mindset Theory—it is based on the science about the plasticity of the brain's neural pathways, something beyond this writer's expertise. If the theory were not without this basis, we could ignore it as another fad, but we cannot. However, let's go back to the foundational definition of Mindset Theory: "implicit theories about personal attributes that guide individuals in making predictions and judging the meaning of events in one's world." Therefore, Mindset Theory is not so much about the neurological science but about the learner's understanding, acceptance, and practice of the science. It is about the learner's beliefs about the nature of intelligence's ability to grow, and how they apply it to their own circumstances when faced with challenges.

Since the publication of *Mindset*: *The New Psychology of Success* (an ambitious title) in the mid-2000s by Carol Dweck, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, the term has led to a "growth" industry in itself. As with any academic work that is co-opted by the popular press, her work and that of her colleagues and former graduate students has been misinterpreted. The two most well-known of these colleagues are David Yeager (University of Texas at Austin) and Angela Duckworth (University of Pennsylvania) of *Grit* and "10,000 hours of practice" fame. (However, there are many others conducting research in this subject area.) In 2015 Dr. Dweck had to set the record straight that her findings were not just about "praising effort rather than talent," (Dweck, 2015; Gross-Loh, 2016) and the 2016 update to the original book addressed such erroneous views.

Despite Dr. Dweck's attempts to pull back on the mistaken "promise" of Mindset Theory, the construct has taken hold across the nation, especially in K-12 and especially in STEM courses. As numerous authors pointed out, the theory has gained millions of dollars in support from government and philanthropic agencies, been spotlighted by the Obama White House in 2013, and spawned a great deal of research, and as mentioned above, misconceptions. There have been hundreds of research studies on Mindset Theory in K-12 and, to a lesser but still significant extent, higher education.

Such research essentially divides into two types: Correlational research as to whether the Mindset a student has at a point in time influences their subsequent learning, and experimental research with Mindset interventions. In terms of the first type, researchers typically administer Dweck's eight-question Theories of Intelligence Scale that contains questions such as “Your intelligence is something that you can’t change very much.” (Four of the eight questions, like this one, are reverse scored). Then the scores on these inventories are correlated with grades, GPA, perceived well-being, performance on tests, or other measures. Often the data is disaggregated to investigate the relationship for different groups, such as low socioeconomic status, minority status, age, or transition status (such as moving from high school to college.) The second type of research employs a Mindset intervention of some sort and then looks at changes in course success rates, student GPA, and self-reports about learning, seeking for statistical significance. The interventions could be a recorded message on Mindset Theory and scientific messages about brain development (usually avoiding the word “Mindset) or a similar reading passage. These messages might be followed by the subject writing a letter to another student about the concepts they have learned or some other activity, although not in all cases.

So, does Mindset Theory work, according to this research? It depends on what one is asking of it. However, the research to date, especially in higher education settings, does not bear out the exorbitant promises of some of the press. Anyone interested in this subject is directed to Sisk, Burgoyne, sun, Butler, and McNamara (2018) for their meta-analysis of over 300 published studies, and interestingly, scores of unpublished ones. Involving both types of research (273 for the first type, 43 for the intervention type), they investigated methodologies and even publication bias. Sisk et al. concluded:

> Some researchers have claimed that mind-set interventions can “lead to large gains in student achievement” and have “striking effects on educational achievement” (Yeager & Walton, 2011, pp. 267 and 268, respectively). Overall, our results do not support these claims. Mind-set interventions on academic achievement were non- significant for adolescents, typical students, and students facing situational challenges (transitioning to a new school, experiencing stereotype threat). However, our results support claims that academically high- risk students and economically disadvantaged students may benefit from growth-mind-set interventions. . .” (p. 568)

Yeager, et al. (2019) indirectly conceded the same, “We emphasize that not all forms of growth mindset interventions can be expected to increase grades or advanced course-taking, even in the targeted subgroups” (p. 368). Yet in that particular national study of 6,320 rising ninth graders, they did find promising evidence that lower-income students benefit more from Mindset interventions and that the peer environment added to sustainability of such effects.

As stated before, the majority of research studied K-12 students, but not exclusively. The results for higher education are mixed as well (Brez, et al., 2020). In conclusion, then, Mindset Theory’s scientific base is sound; where and how it might be applied in the best way is still a matter for further research. This conclusion is especially true for students in post-secondary education and, for the readers of this article, public speaking students.

Mindset and Public Speaking Education

Not having delved into the research on Mindset Theory at the time, in Fall 2020 I participated in mini-course and short course on Mindset Theory offered by the University System of Georgia. Previously I participated in faculty book groups on Dweck’s original work and on *Grit,* and I have heard David Yeager speak at a national conference on a successful intervention conducted at the University of Texas. The USG courses helped clarify some of the fog and caused me to dig deeper for this presentation and article. However, the courses also avoided the overpromising of Mindset Theory as the answer to eliminating all student academic problems—which it is not, and Dweck and her associates never intended to say it was.

In the course, the attaining and use of a growth mindset was joined with the need for students to find a clear-cut purpose and feeling a sense of belonging in the institution. These are the “three legs of a stool” for aiding academic and personal success for students. Mindset Theory is clearly an important leg of this stool, because through it we can educate students on brain-based learning strategies, time management, and resource allocation, and prepare them for responding to both success and failure.

As I came out of the fog of Mindset Theory and began to distinguish it in my understanding from other educational constructs, I turned my reflection to how Mindset Theory applies to public speaking. I have plenty of experience from which to draw—43 years in the classroom teaching various iterations of the course in various institutions and under various syllabi. In reflecting on these many years and many students, I brainstormed the following and present them as the basis for a discussion:

- What we teach is difficult for most people, and many of our students, perhaps most, would not take the class if it were not required in their programs. What we teach is believed by many, including our students, to be an “innate talent” some have and some just do not. Our students probably have a fixed mindset in the beginning, and whether we have heard of Mindset Theory or not, we have been facing their fixed mindsets for as long as we have taught the subject.
- Public speaking instructors have an inherent “growth mindset” approach by virtue of what we do. We know improvement in oral communication skills comes only through efforts, some failures, and powering through those. We know that reflective practices and other strategies are necessary to learn these skills.
- We know that public speaking is not just a set of behaviors but a complex, multi-layered process that involves a growth mindset about learning and an audience-centered “mindset” about the rhetorical process.

Desiring to gain insight into how other communication instructors have approached and studied Mindset Theory, I surveyed the literature. It is limited. I found only two truly relevant studies, Nordin and Broeckelman-Post (2019), who investigated Mindset Theory and public speaking apprehension, and Stewart, McConnell, Stallings, and Roscoe (2019), who studied how students’ beliefs about the public speaking interacted with public speaking anxiety and growth mindset scores. Both were correlational studies rather than interventional, experimental studies, and both used Dweck’s Theories of Intelligence Scale. Nordin and Broeckelman-Post, however, created a version where the eight statements about intelligence substituted the words “public speaking skills” for “intelligence.” Both of these studies pointed to a strong connection between students’ mindsets and performance in the class; this is clearly an area where more research would have theoretical and practical value.

The concerns one might have with the research in Mindset Theory in general applies to the limited research into the connection of Mindset Theory and teaching public speaking. How deep do the interventions go? Is a one-time experience really enough to embed something as important as Mindset Theory should be? How does the instructor utilize Mindset Theory throughout the course, rather than as a one-off? What are the best ways for Mindset Theory to be taught, actively, rather than passively?

So we are left with the question, “Where do Mindset Theory and approaches affect what we do in the public speaking classroom?” Other questions for consideration are:

- “Can we be too rigid about mindset?”
- “Are we seeing it more as a polarity than a continuum?” (Limeri, et al., 2020)
- “Are we shaming others over mindset, treating a fixed mindset as a pathology rather than a developmental stage?”
- “Is it possible that mindset is more discipline specific in higher education, with adult learners, than for younger learners?”

The research on Mindset Theory will continue, as well it should. It is neither panacea nor placebo, neither a solution to all student success needs nor a platitude we can sell to our students to build up their self-confidence and motivation. That is my conclusion: know Mindset Theory, utilize it, but use it in conjunction with what else we know works with freshmen—their making personal connections, their having a sense of purpose, and their belief that what they study in classes contributes to their overall life purposes and goals.

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Worst, Best, Most Likely

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While taking a course on "Flourishing" offered by the Governors Teaching Fellowship program in the summer of 2020, the course instructor, Dr. Cynthia Alby provided an overview of a reflective activity that can help a person better confront catastrophic thinking (Alby, June 1).

This exercise asks a person to think about situation that is causing them stress. They are first asked to think of the absolute worst-case scenario outcome they can imagine in relation to this stressor. One is instructed to use exaggeration and humor to maximize this worst-case scenario in their mind. For example, if a person were experiencing anxiety related to an upcoming job interview, they would think of a truly worst-case outcome such as doing so poorly on the interview that the interviewer asks others from the corporation to come in to witness this debacle of interviewing and then those employees start posting about this awful interview on social media and it goes viral and maximizes embarrassment for the interviewee.

The second stage of this reflective exercise is to then think of an exaggerated best-case scenario. Extending the interview example, this person might imagine their interview goes so well that the interviewer immediately calls corporate headquarters to tell them about how amazing this job candidate is and the candidate is offered a top position in the company on the spot and an influential business publication puts them on their cover that month. Again, the key is to exaggerate.

Of course, life rarely gives us worst- and best-case scenarios. Therefore, the final step of the exercise is to think about the most likely scenario in this situation. For example, the interviewee imagines the interview going well and at a point where there is a minor lapse of memory, the interviewee is able to recover quickly and gather their thoughts and move on successfully.

This process of reflecting on extremes helps a person play out the worst fears yet helps them bring their focus back to the most likely reality of the situation. This can not only allay anxiety but build confidence for the person when they are challenged to face that fear in a real-world circumstance.

Upon being exposed to this exercise on catastrophic thinking, it became apparent that this idea could be transferred to reducing public speaking anxiety. Speaking anxiety remains as a significant barrier to student success within our communication courses (Holmquist, Konda-Varilek, & Westwick, 2015, p. 69). Those who teach public speaking need to develop new and more effective tools to teach students how to gain control of their nervousness and make that nervousness work for them (Ablamowicz, 2005, p. 98).

The "Worst, Best, Most Likely" assignment (see Appendix A) was designed to introduce students to this reflective practice that can help reduce stress. The assignment focuses on the stress that is related to public speaking. For the purposes of this class, the assignment was designed as a discussion board posting. That way, students could read and be inspired from each other's posts. In addition to having students reflect on worst-, best-, and most likely case scenarios, they were also instructed to map out their next steps in helping them achieve the most likely scenario in their first class speech. This assignment can be adapted to an essay assignment or even an individual or group discussion activity for a class session.

One of the keys to this assignment is the use of exaggeration and humor. It causes the student to see how out of alignment their fears are in terms of the upcoming assignment. It leads the student to develop optimism about this initial class speech. As Marrero, Carballeira, and Hernández-Cabrera

(2020, p.1117) point out, optimistic people develop a self-concept that is consistent with their idea of the world. These expectations about positive consequences allow them to continue striving to achieve their goals, as well as to give up goals that are unattainable (Marrero, Carballeira, & Hernández-Cabrera, 2020, p.1117).

In order to get a better sense of this discussion posting assignment, excerpts from several student posts are included below with the permission of those students. They have not been corrected for punctuation and spelling.

Worst-Case Scenario Examples

“The worst possible thing that could happen for my first speech in class starts in the beginning. First when i got up to give my speech I would trip and fall in front on everyone while spilling someone's drink in their lap. then i would get the hiccups from being so embarrassed. I would have the hiccups so bad the whole time i was speaking that nobody could understand me. Everyone is very uninterested in what im saying and half the class gets up and leaves. Dr. Hayward tells me I suck at speaking and fails me 30 seconds into my speech. As i'm still trying to get my speech out, I knock over a lit candle and set the whole school on fire and then I go to jail for property damage and also fail my classes…and I don't get into the PA program and my entire life is ruined from trying to give this one speech (Maddie Saltz, Augusta University, COMM1110 Student, Fall 2020).”

“I stand prepared in front of the room. Silence falls as I await my turn to speak. My mouth opens, rehearsed words flowing like a stream from my mind. Rocks, a waterfall. I'm falling. I'm failing. The stream turns into a cascade, lawless and chaotic. I'm forgetting my lines. I'm jumbling my words. I panic as I hit the bottom. I'm drowning, not in the silence of the classroom, but in the screams in my head. *‘I just had to say my lines. I'm too far gone now. I messed it up. It's not right. I can't. I can't. I can hear my heart, it's not beating right. I lose my breath. I'm frozen.*’ (Dellinger Dellinger, Augusta University, COMM1110 Student, Fall 2020).”

Best-Case Scenario Example

“The best-case scenario for my speech would be one in which I can deliver my speech without looking like a crazy person who is constantly rolling their eyes, and one where I am rewarded for giving this incredible presentation. This reward can be anything, but I hope its a Dairy Queen ice cream cake. Ever since I was a little boy, I would always ask my mom to get me an ice cream cake from Dairy Queen for my birthday. Being able to have one as a reward would fill my heart with joy, and it would be like I'm a kid again! (No really though, if this can be arranged I will knock your socks off with my speech) (TJ Schaaf, Augusta University, COMM1110 Student, Fall 2020).”

Most Likely Scenario Example

“The ‘most likely to happen’ scenario would be me forgetting a few things and my speech not going exactly as rehearsed due to my anxiousness. I might talk a little fast and stumble over my words, but it should go decently as long as I prepare properly prior to deliverance (Tanaysia Holmes, Augusta University, COMM1110 Student, Fall 2020).”

Next Steps Example

“My next step(s) to ensure a smooth speech will be paying lots of attention to my organization of ideas and how to start my speech off in an interesting way. Practicing with different audiences will be my next step to getting used to speaking in front of an audience so that I can get used of the feeling of it not being as bad as I thought when I finish my speech (Simone Thompson, Augusta University, COMM1110 Student, Fall 2020)."

References

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Appendix A

Worst/Best/Most Likely Discussion Post

Background

Speech anxiety is normal. This assignment is a fun way to think about your own version of public speaking anxiety. Each person will get to chance to expand on their concerns in a light-hearted and supportive setting in order to help alleviate stage fright.

Imagine you are about to give your first speech for the class. What do you think is the worst case scenario? What is the best case scenario? What is actually most likely to happen? What is your next step so that you can work toward achieving your best case scenario?

Assignment

In the class discussion board for this assignment, please post the following (make sure to either use four paragraphs that follow this order or label each of the four separate parts of your response):

1. What do you think is the worst thing that could happen with your first speech for the class? Have fun with this and exaggerate whatever you are thinking about. For example, if you think people will not pay attention, think of the broadest, silliest version of just how bad that could get. For example, the class will not pay attention and start to do other things while you speak, including at least one student who pulls out a pillow and decides to take a nap. Use your imagination!
2. What is your best case scenario for this first speech? Again, exaggerate this projected outcome. This will not only be a successful speech, but one that is so good you will win a national award for it or balloons will drop down from the ceiling to celebrate just how great your speech was!
3. Now, let's get serious. What do you think is the most likely scenario? What is likely really to happen when you give your speech?
4. Finally, what is your next step to ensure your speech will go smoothly?

Evaluation

You will be evaluated on your ability to address all four parts of this assignment. You can also review the grading rubric for this assignment.