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Descriptive and Supportive Language: A New Heuristic for Training Communication Center Consultants

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On any given day, a student walking into the Communication Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro is greeted by the cheerful *Hello* of a desk manager, the warm smile of a consultant, perhaps even the soothing sounds of jazz emanating throughout the waiting area. At the Communication Center, desk managers, consultants, and graduate assistants alike work together to create a welcoming atmosphere that reflects the Center's mission: to support speakers in their ongoing process of becoming more confident and competent communicators through instruction, collaborative consultation, and feedback. The Center strives to meet speakers wherever they are in their speech making process, making the most critical part of this equation the discussions that happen in the consultation room, and, by extension, the language that frames those discussions.

Consultation feedback is built on the cornerstone of remaining judgement- and value-free. Center consultants do not provide any kind of graded evaluation on speeches. However, given the stressful situation that public speaking can be for many students, it can often be difficult for consultants to remain neutral when speakers are asking for that value-based feedback: Is this speech good? Did I do well? It can be tempting to give in to such questions to make speakers feel better about a process which can be truly anxiety-inducing. For many students, the decision to step into a communication center is not their own, and has, in fact, been required for their course or assignment. King and Atkins-Sayre (2012) found that students are unlikely to attend consultations without faculty support (Davis, Linvill, and Jacobs, 2017). Given the weight of these circumstances, what consultant would not want to work to immediately set a student's mind at ease?

As Ward and Schwartzman (2009) found in a survey of communication center consultants, consultants "consistently mentioned that making clients feel more comfortable, maintaining an open mind, and offering encouragement were caring behaviors that they [wanted to show] in their consultations" (p. 369). These inclinations, while well-meaning, ultimately do a disservice to our students if the quality of feedback is sacrificed, which is why we must work to hone our use of language. In a consultation setting, using value or judgement statements to discuss a speaker's progress in a speech may reduce their stress or anxiety by providing them with the instant gratification of knowing they are doing "well" or their speech is "good", but they are then unlikely to make any improvements in the long term or build upon their public speaking skills. The cornerstone of effective feedback is about finding the best way of communicating to speakers what they have achieved in their speech and what they can continue to work on for future speeches (Sachse-Brown & Aldridge, 2013). Training communication center consultants

to give feedback that is supportive and utilizes specific, descriptive language will ensure that speakers can still walk away feeling accomplished, while at the same time knowing what their next steps should be to get them confidently to presentation day.

To that end, engaging and relevant training programs will not only ensure consistency within each individual consultation, but build centers' reputations as well. Realistically, training programs will differ from one university to another in order to fit the needs of each unique student body. For instance, at The University of Texas Learning Center, Way (2012) discusses the two main goals of their consultant training: to "deliver content successfully" and "prepare peer tutors for the world of work" (57). Both Weertz (2012), of Angelo State University, and McWilliams (2012), of Austin State University, establish rapport and relationship building as the cornerstones for their training approaches, maintaining that the relationship that develops between the consultant and speaker largely determines how successful a session will be. Addressing instead the changing landscape of technology and the increasing reliance of students on consultants to assist them in creating visual aids for presentations, Moreau & Normand (2012) of James Madison University devote a large portion of their tutor training to technology, having implemented an infrastructure to keep consultants "up to speed," more comfortable with online applications, and able to respond to faculty requests for assistance in creating "exciting visual aids." While there are a myriad of approaches communication centers can take to train their peer consultants, a review of the literature finds that several basic principles are adhered to across the board. Peer consultants should avoid doing work for the speakers and instead ask questions and offer suggestions; peer consultants should listen to a speaker's concerns, be responsive, and not try to dominate the conversation; peer consultants should not provide speakers with hypothetical assignment grades, but discuss speech strengths and areas of improvement. Attention to these cornerstone practices undoubtedly ensures a well-rounded and competent communications staff. However, these practices fail to specifically address the manner in which consultant feedback should be delivered to speakers. In other words, what do I say and how do I go about saying it while maintaining these tenets?

The answer lies in language training; to implement this effectively, then, we need to understand what is unsuitable about our current language choices to develop improved language use in order to give speakers more specific, meaningful, and constructive feedback. Judgement and value statements are forms of evaluative feedback, which is, in essence, a summary of how well or poorly a speaker has done in regard to some aspect of their speech or performance. While it is easier to refrain from doling out letter grades in a consultation setting, it can be more difficult to refrain from comments about a speech's "effectiveness", which while seemingly innocuous, still denotes positive value to the speaker. The goal of language training is to teach consultants to identify destructive patterns of language in order to substitute supportive patterns. This understanding is based on Gibb's Communication Model (1961), which find 12 linguistic attitudes that correspond with either supportive or destructive feedback practices. The focus of this training model is on the first pair: language of evaluation versus language of description. Language of evaluation becomes problematic within a consultation because it

relies on "you" language, which places success or failure directly on the speaker. Conversely, language of description removes the focus from the speaker and places it on the text, effectively separating the two. It is able to remain neutral by describing behavior and giving that behavior context. The most effective way to implement this model in a center setting is to pair language training with practical application, which can be accomplished via a language review and practice sessions between consultants.

The influence of language and power of suggestion within the consultation setting makes language training an ideal addition to current communication center focuses that already include technology and relationship building. Language is one of the most influential and formidable things we use in everyday life; it has the power to enact change, revolutionize mindsets, and transform lives. While feedback given in a communication center consultation may seem inconsequential in the larger scheme of things, the most minute response to a struggling student speaker could have a lasting impact on their confidence. The more we come to understand our everyday language choices, the more definitive decisions we can make as consultants to in turn empower the speakers who take the brave step to walk into our jazz-filled waiting room and ask for help.

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