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Professional Communication Skills: Interventions to Effectively Teach Undergraduate Students

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Abstract
Effective communication is necessary for every profession (Hargie, 2016). Understanding how to facilitate dialogue is especially important for educators (Wei, Murphey & Firetto, 2018). Discussions help students understand course content, and effective professional communication is key to creating shared meaning with students, parents, and colleagues (Michaels & O’Conner, 2015). This study was conducted in the fall of 2021 to identify what interventions, including direct instruction, feedback, and self-assessment, support undergraduate education students in developing their professional discourse skills. The researcher first conducted a literature review regarding communication and discussion skills. She then created a module that taught an overview of these skills. Lastly, she created a rubric to measure students’ acquisition of the skills. She presented the module and rubric to the class as an online assignment at the beginning of the semester. Class participants then recorded biweekly small group discussions. The researcher scored each individual student on the created rubric and met with students after each session to review the rubric and provide feedback on their performance. Students also completed a brief self-assessment form after each discussion. Utilizing the rubric, the researcher tracked student progress across six criteria over six small group discussions. The data show improvements in scores across all domains, with the largest proportional increase after the first two feedback sessions. The class participants completed an optional survey at the end of the semester that indicated students felt the four interventions: module, rubric, self-assessment, and individual feedback sessions, were either very or somewhat beneficial (with the expectation of two out of eighty responses). Out of all the interventions, students indicated that the individualized rubric is the best to incorporate into future courses. The researcher created a rubric and module template for faculty interested in incorporating professional discourse skills into their coursework, as the majority of these skills are generalizable across contexts.

This student presentation is available at ScholarWorks: https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/under_showcase_2022/3
INTRODUCTION
Effective communication is necessary for every profession (Hargie, 2016). Undergraduate courses can teach students the content knowledge for their field and foster the soft skills they will need to employ to be successful in a career. This study was conducted in the fall of 2021 to identify what interventions support undergraduate education students to develop their professional discourse skills. The thirty-two students were enrolled in the ED-ESP 260, a special education course taught in the College of Education.

LITERATURE REVIEW
An informal literature review was conducted to identify what evidence-based communication practices have been published. These practices, such as building rapport, using group member names, rereading, restating and paraphrasing of other’s ideas, were found to increase student’s critical analysis of the content and engagement with other participants (Michaels & O’Connor, 2015, Wei et. al., 2016).

INTERVENTIONS
Four interventions were used to support students’ acquisition of professional communication skills. This included:
- A short module directly teaching skills
- A rubric scoring students on communication skills. There were six criteria ranked on a scale of 1 (does not meet) to 5 (exceptional)
- A self-assessment tool for students to identify how they employed the use of those skills
- Synchronous, online feedback sessions with individual students

Implementation Timeline
The module was presented at the beginning of the semester. The other interventions were given to each student individually after biweekly small group discussions starting after their week 4 discussion.

RUBRIC
Utilizing the rubric, the researcher tracked student progress across six criteria over five small group discussions. The data show improvements in scores across all domains, with the largest proportional increase after the first two feedback sessions. After two sessions, the scores plateaued. Survey responses indicated that students felt the feedback sessions were redundant after week 6.

STUDENT FEEDBACK
Survey information.
- Students completed an optional survey regarding the effectiveness of the interventions
- Twenty-two of the thirty-six students responded

Results
- Nearly all students found each intervention either entirely or somewhat beneficial.
- Out of all the interventions, students indicated that the individualized rubric is the best to incorporate into future courses.

GENERALIZATION
The researcher has created a module and rubric template for professors who would like to incorporate instruction about professional communication in their courses.

CONCLUSION
Undergraduate students can show evidence of acquiring professional communication skills with the provided interventions. This data indicates that implementing all interventions, with only two individual feedback sessions would be most desired by participants while still improving scores. Further studies will need to be conducted to identify if the interventions benefit students in different areas of study, and to identify what levels of intervention it is appropriate to implement.

REFERENCES