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Teaching communication in sex education: Facilitating communication skills knowledge and ease of use

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TEACHING COMMUNICATION IN SEX EDUCATION:
FACILITATING COMMUNICATION SKILLS KNOWLEDGE AND EASE OF USE

A Dissertation
Presented in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

BY
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JUNE, 2011

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VITA

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Sex education has long been the subject of intense debate, mostly centered on what its goals should be and how much information should be imparted to students. Much of this debate results from the fact that sexuality is so strongly tied to personal values and morals. Some people view sexuality as natural and commonplace, and thus sex education classes should cover a range of topics, including information about contraception usage. Others maintain that sexuality is sacred, and thus that the primary purpose of sexual education should be to deliver the message to abstain from sex until a certain point in life, usually after marriage (Elia & Eliason, 2009; Kirby, Laris, & Rolleri, 2006; Lucker, 2006). Despite these philosophical differences, most people who support the implementation of some type of sex education program agree that sex education should reduce negative sexual outcomes, such as unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). A great deal of the research on effectiveness of sex education is solely to establish which programs are most effective in decreasing these outcomes and frequently to establish if abstinence-only or comprehensive programs are better for achieving this goal. However, research in this area has begun to focus on identifying the common characteristics of sexuality education programs that effectively reduce pregnancy and disease rates, without focusing on the value system on which they are based (Kirby et al., 2006). This will enable educators to find the best elements across the variety of programs, and use them to make all programs better.

The perspective from which researchers are approaching program effectiveness is shifting, but it is still almost exclusively defined as reduction in rates of unwanted pregnancy and STI transmission. Another way to assess program effectiveness is to establish which programs

best provide students with the skills to make healthy sexual decisions. One understudied feature of sex education is communication skills training, especially the teaching of skills that would enable young people to express their views about sex to a sexual partner. Communication within sexual relationships is positively related to relationship satisfaction and safe sex behaviors such as condom use (Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998; Harper & Welsh, 2007). Communication has the potential to make relationships more successful, while also reducing rates of pregnancy and STIs.

It is the need for an effective and flexible program to teach communication skills within the context of sex education that informs the proposed research. The purpose of this study is to determine what techniques are best for teaching communication skills in a way that will allow students: 1) to gain information about healthy ways to talk about sexual topics, and 2) to make personal connections with the material, such that they see those skills as accessible for use in their own lives. Specifically, this study will establish whether teaching communication skills within the context of sex education will result in participants feeling more at ease talking about sexual issues to a sexual partner, above and beyond the impact of teaching communication skills in a non-sexual context. In addition, using constructivist learning theory as a framework, it will test whether personal engagement with material related to sexual communication makes participants feel more at ease with using the communication skills presented than simply reading and summarizing the same information. The following literature review will begin with a brief history of sexuality education in the United States, including how different personal, political, social and religious value systems have shaped education in this country. This will be followed by a review of the research on the effectiveness of sexuality education programs, including a summary of the characteristics that are common across the most effective programs. Finally,

there will be a discussion of why communication is an important element of sexual relationships, and how sexuality education programs can be structured to most effectively teach sexual communication skills.

The History of Sex Education

The discussion and debate about sexuality education in the United States has been part of the social discourse for a little over a hundred years. One of the most interesting things about the historical debates is that many of the issues that frame the modern debate are much the same as they were in the beginning. Some of the most prominent questions that have made up this discussion have included what the goals and objectives of sex education should be, what information is appropriate to include, and who should provide the information (Goldfarb, 2009). These were questions that guided the development and implementation of the very first sexuality education programs and they are the questions that the modern debate is still trying to answer.

Sex education first became prominent in the 1890s. Social reformers who were concerned about the deterioration of the traditional family and the spread of venereal disease wanted to use education to clean up sexuality and to teach sexual morals (Elia, 2009; Goldfarb, 2009; Irvine, 2002; Luker, 2006). They saw information as a way to minimize bad decision making and sexual risk. The American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) was the first formal group organized around the support of sex education (Luker, 2006; Elia; 2009). The ASHA was a “social hygiene” organization, a label chosen because they saw sex education as a way to promote health in all its forms, social, mental, spiritual, and physical; through increasing the many forms of health, they hoped to improve all aspects of life. In this period sex education meant educating individuals about socially appropriate sex, which for the members of the ASHA meant sex within marriage. They did not want to limit all sexual behavior, just the inappropriate sexual

behavior that caused “social ills.” The approach of the ASHA was intended to avoid making people uncomfortable about sex in general so that they wouldn’t avoid sex in appropriate contexts, yet to still warn about the dangers of “social diseases,” later called venereal disease or sexually transmitted diseases.

While many groups, including social hygienists, the National Educators Association (NEA), and physicians supported the inclusion of sex education into public education, there were those who opposed it (Goldfarb, 2009; Kempner, 2009). One of the most prominent arguments against school based sex education was (and is) that information about sexuality specifically should be the purview of parents and the church, and that governmental and public organizations should stay out of the private lives of citizens in general (Elia, 2009; Irvine, 2002; Luker, 2006). There were also those that were unsure about the efficacy of sex education, and whether it would have positive results. There was the concern that teaching about sexuality would not quell sexual behavior, but actually encourage sexual curiosity; the “culture of silence” then surrounded sexuality and kept discussion of sexual issues out of the public realm was rooted in this concern (Elia, 2009). Other concerns involved the inclusion of additional material into school curricula, fearing that the inclusion of sexuality education would take the focus away from other academic topics (Elia, 2009; Goldfarb, 2009).

Despite these concerns and debates, by the late 1920’s about 45% of schools reported having some sort of sexuality education curricula (Elia, 2009), though the great depression resulted in schools losing funding for these programs and parents taking up the role of sex educators. Then, as the 1930s came to a close, federal support was again starting to be provided for sex education. States also began passing laws that made education about venereal disease mandatory for high school students, and in 1940 the U.S. Public Health Service formally

indicated that there was a significant need for sexuality education in schools (Elia, 2009; Goldfarb, 2009). By the late 1940s and 1950s, another source of information about sexuality became available when Kinsey published his two books summarizing male and female sexual practices; the information shocked many, but provided a wealth of knowledge about the variability of sexual behavior in the “average” American.

The 1960s and 70s brought about significant cultural changes in regards to sexuality, which included new views on sexuality, gender, and the role of the public in regulating sexuality. Until this period, many had taken for granted that it was the right of the society to regulate what was appropriate sexual behavior. However, by the end of this era, there was growing support for the idea that sexual behavior was a private affair based on personal preference and choice (Luker, 2006). Contraception became freely available for all adults, married or single, and there was a push for women and men alike to embrace sexual freedom and pleasure. This shift, along with the backlash against it, translated into another set of changes in sex education, including a surge in the number of interest groups related to sex education.

One of these groups is the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), founded in 1965. SIECUS is a national organization that focuses on providing information and education about sexuality that was based in positive views of sexuality, sexual behavior, and sexual variation (Elias, 2009; Goldfarb, 2009; Irvine, 2002). SIECUS took the position that sex was a natural part of humanity, and that sexual responsibility should be combined with an appreciation of the enjoyment and benefits that could come from free expression of sexuality. Additionally, in 1975 the World Health Organization (WHO) reintroduced a concept that would have been very familiar to the social hygienists of the 1890s, sexual health, which was again defined as health in terms of the physical, emotional, intellectual,

and social aspects of sexuality. The organization went on to advocate for using sexuality to enhance relationships (which included communication within relationships), the acceptance of pleasure as a natural part of sexual relationships, and for the rights of all people to receive sexual information (Elia, 2009).

However, as always there were two sides to the sex education movement, and several conservative groups such as the John Birch Society, Parents Opposed to Sex and Sensitivity Education (POSSE), and Mothers Organized for Moral Stability (MOMS) formed to protest the implementation of sexuality education, stating that sex education should be provided in the home and that teaching sex education in schools did not allow for the teaching of proper sexual morals (Elia, 2009; Luker 2006; Irvine, 2002). As a result of their protestations, many school districts removed sex education from their curricula. These groups continued to be active throughout the 1970s, representing a small but vocal group of parents opposed to public sex education. Their use of emotionally evocative (and factually unfounded) messages, including claims that sex education was immoral, that it was a communist plot, or that it harmed the inherent innocence of children, to create controversy about sex education would become a hallmark of the conservative anti-sex education movement that is still used to this day.

The anti-education movement began as a specific reaction to certain forms of sex education, but as the 1980s dawned, the movement became part of the greater politically minded groups referred to as the New Right and the Religious right. Additional groups such as the American Family Association, the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family were started during this period. The issue of sex education became part of a larger push for a return to traditional values, which encompassed sexual values, abortion rights, and gender issues among others (Elia, 2009; Irvine, 2002). These groups used the AIDS crisis to advocate for the implementation of

sexuality education that exclusively taught sexual abstinence. A growing fear that irresponsible sexual behavior would lead to death, along with the passage of the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), which provided the first federal funding for abstinence-only education, resulted in implementation of these programs in many schools (Elia, 2009; Goldfarb, 2009). Many still held that sex education should provide detailed and varied information, and the AIDS crisis also made the concept of teaching about “safer sex” popular. For example, the Surgeon General in office in the mid-eighties released a statement emphasizing the seriousness of AIDS and encouraging public education that started as early as possible and taught about safe sex and sexual variety, including placing gay relationships on par with heterosexual relationships (Elia, 2009). Parents also demonstrated support for comprehensive education in their responses to several Gallop polls completed in the 1980’s and 1990’s. Responses indicated that while parents saw the value of teaching abstinence, they also wanted their children to receive information about such things as contraceptives, with the proportion of favorable responses consistently above 80 percent (Elia, 2009).

Despite the national support for comprehensive education, including the Surgeon General’s 2001 “Call for Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior” which specified a need for ways to increase sexual health and knowledge that incorporates scientific knowledge and respects the deeply held values associated with sexuality (Thrasher, 2009), continued federal funding has resulted in wide-spread implementation of abstinence-only-until-marriage curricula. For some, the funding represented a validation of the programs, and for others it was easier to accept the programs than to fight for others (Kemper, 2009). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act, the welfare bill passed in 1996 provided continued federal funding for these programs, as did Title V of the Social Security Act,

and more recently with the passage of the Health Care Reform bill (Goldfarb, 2009; Hauser, 2008; Landua, 2010). However, while there were always individual people who rejected the implementation of these programs, more and more states have been rejecting the federal dollars in favor of establishing other funding that allows them to institute their preferred sex education programs (Kempner, 2009; Landau, 2010). This may demonstrate a growing dissatisfaction with the abstinence-only programs that meet the federal guidelines at least partially due to the research on the impact and effectiveness of the various types of sex education programs, which will be discussed in the next section.

Evaluation of Sexuality Education Programs

As has become apparent, the way that sexuality education is understood in this country is very strongly tied into personal beliefs and value systems. One way to differentiate common value systems is by using the categories of sexual conservative and sexual liberal. While these labels do not represent a truly categorical divide, they do help to represent some of the foundational differences that have resulted in the value debate. The main way that sexual conservatives and liberals differ is in their view of what sex is. For sexual conservatives sex is generally seen as something that is sacred and that should be preserved within the context of marriage (Luker, 2006). For many sexual liberals, there is the belief that sex is natural, and that as such it is appropriate within many different contexts and conceptualizations.

This divide is often seen in the choices that organizations make about what programs they want to use, and even if programs are implemented at all. The very existence of school based sexuality education programs is considered inappropriate by some who believe that children should learn about sex in the home, and that it is the parent's exclusive right to teach their children about such topics (Elia & Eliason, 2009). In terms of public programs, abstinence-only

programs tend to be based around the concept of sexuality as sacred, while comprehensive programs tend to be based more around the understanding of sex as natural (Luker, 2006). This influences the type and amount of information taught to students, as well as the skills and ideologies students are taught. For example, abstinence-only-until-marriage programs teach that the only appropriate context for sexual behaviors and expression is within a marital relationship, and that sexual expression is only healthy and only has positive results when it takes place in such a relationship (Trenholm et al., 2007). National guidelines for comprehensive programs, say that classes should teach that choices surrounding sexuality and sexual expression should be part of a personal discovery and decision-making process. Students should be provided with a wide variety of information and encouraged to come to their own conclusions about their sexual understanding and boundaries (National Guidelines Taskforce, 2004).

Despite differences, the thread that ties all of these together is the primary goal that all sources of educational information have – to teach. It is essential that all sex education programs be educationally beneficial. As a result, much of the existing research on sex education programs has focused assessing and comparing the effectiveness of the types of programs in an attempt to establish which programs (and thus, for some, which value systems) are superior. This research has been important because in addition to the differences between the categories of programs, there is also considerable variability within them, and programs often fall between or combine the features of the two main categories of abstinence-only and comprehensive that are so often used to structure the debate about sex education. In reality, the differences across programs fall much more along a continuum than a categorical divide. It is important to recognize this continuum, so that the best parts of all the different programs can be identified. This is especially important, because those whose values are represented by programs that focus exclusively on

abstinence will continue to advocate for those programs, and those that promote inclusion of information about a wider variety of behaviors will advocate for more comprehensive programs, regardless of the amount of research or evidence that exists about the benefits of the other type. While there are some proponents of value-free sexuality education, a purely fact-based structure that is devoid of any value based information is unrealistic. The facts chosen to be included, the recognition of what is true and/or accurate, and the presentation and interpretation of facts are all based in the values of the instructors, the program developers, the school and the community within which the class is taught (Elia & Eliason, 2009). As was suggested by the Surgeon General's call for action (Thrasher, 2009), sexuality is something that is inextricably linked with personal values. Due to these realities, program evaluation is transitioning from comparing programs based on what value system they teach to establishing the characteristics that are common across the most effective sex education programs so that programs based on any value system can be as effective as possible.

Studies published by Franklin and Corcoran (2000), Jemmott and colleagues (2010), and Kirby and colleagues (2006) have similarly identified common characteristics that occur amongst the most effective sex education programs. One of the most impactful variables mentioned is the use of an established theoretical perspective to inform the educational activities of the programs; those that are based in theory are generally more effective at accomplishing the goals of the programs than those that do not have such a framework. Effective programs have been structured around such theories as social cognitive theory, theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, social learning theories, cognitive-behavioral theories, the social influence model, and the health belief model (see Franklin & Corcoran, 2000 for review). A second characteristic commonly found in effective programs is that the information and delivery are

specifically designed for the target population, paying attention to demographic and cultural characteristics as such as age and social environment, and the focus and values of the community. Effective programs were guided by specific goals and presented targeted information in line with those goals. Specifically for adolescents, giving them lots of information and letting them make their own choice did not appear as effective as clearly stating values and laying out what behaviors were considered appropriate within that value system. Additionally, effective programs do not require educators to implement teaching techniques they are unfamiliar with, activities that are difficult to implement, or equipment that is difficult to obtain. Finally, effective programs include in the curriculum skill building activities. Skill building instruction should provide knowledge, specific information about situations and possible ways of diminishing negative outcomes through behavior, and the opportunity to practice the skills.

When talking about effectiveness, what research largely refers to, regardless of the type of programs being evaluated, is how well a program reduces undesirable sexual behaviors, such as early onset of sexual intercourse, rates of unprotected sex, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and sexual assault (Flora & Thorensen, 1988; Franklin & Corcoran, 2000; Jemmott, et al., 2010; Kirby et al., 2006; Kirby, 2002a, Kirby 2002b; Melchert & Burnett, 1990). Based on the rapid spread of STIs and persistently high rates of unwanted pregnancies, the focus on reducing negative outcomes is very much warranted. However, sexual education programs should aim to do more than just reduce negative behaviors and consequences; they should also encourage positive, relationship-enhancing behaviors.

One of the elements of effective programs is that they include skill building. To this aim, programs could teach students communication skills that aid in relationship negotiation, how to better develop affection and trust in a relationship, and how to engage in more empowered

decision making about sexual behavior. Knowledge of such skills would likely result in healthier intimate relationships, while also serving to reduce negative outcomes. For example, helping students learn how to talk to their partners about abstaining from sexual intercourse in order to prevent STIs and unwanted pregnancies may be far more effective than simply telling a student to “just say no” without giving them the necessary tools to convey that message.

Benefits of Communication

Existing research has linked good relationship communication with a number of positive relationship variables. Overall, good communication skills are a foundation of positive relationships. Couples who engage in effective communication tend to have more positive and satisfying relationships. This is true for both adults (Egeci & Gencoz, 2006; Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Meeks et al., 1998) and adolescents (Harper & Welsh, 2007; Turk & Hocking, 2005; Widman, Welsh, McNulty, & Little, 2006). Learning sexual communication skills is uniquely important though, because there are many unique benefits to communication about sexual topics specifically.

Effective communication about sexual issues predicts unique variance in relationship satisfaction above and beyond that of general relationship communication (Byers & Demmons, 1999; MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Meeks et al., 1998). Being open to discussion about sexual topics for adolescents is related to satisfaction with romantic relationships (Widman et al., 2006). An experimental study which involved reading and imagining the self in scenarios about a first time sexual encounter or at three months of sexual involvement by Turk and Hocking (2005) demonstrated that people feel better about themselves, and have more respect for an imagined partner, and viewed the experience as more sexually positive if the person communicates about their sexual needs and insists on a condom vs. not insisting on a condom. Lack of

communication intimacy and greater differences between partners perceptions of the importance of communication in their relationship predicted less sexual initiation (a specific type of sex specific communication) and less sexual satisfaction for married couples (Grossmann, Julien, Mathieu, & Chartrand, 2003). For married couples/couples in sexual relationships, their relationships will be better if they are on the same page about the importance of communication. It is important to be able to communicate sexual desires and requests, as higher levels of sexual interaction correlate with relationship satisfaction, and there is a correlation between marital and sexual satisfaction. Communication also is related to contraceptive and condom use in a number of different populations (Farmer & Metson, 2006; Guzman et al., 2003; Widman et al., 2006). This means that encouraging sexual communication is also likely to encourage and increase the use of contraception, which will minimize the negative outcomes of unprotected sexual behavior.

Learning Communication

Most individuals gain their first understanding of how to navigate interpersonal relationships within the home, and then continue to develop the necessary skills with friends and associates in school, social, and work environments. Research looking into patterns of conflict management communication finds consistent similarities between the conflict management style of the family and the conflict management styles used within dating relationships (Reese-Weber & Kahn, 2005), and those who come from families with more open and “conversationally-oriented” communication styles report more ability communicating with a romantic partner (Koesten, 2004). Research explicitly looking at sexual communication within families, found that discussion about specific topics predicted discussion about those same topics with romantic partners (Powell & Segrin, 2004), indicating that we may even be able to learn sexual communication behaviors from family members. Unfortunately, in multiple studies participants

have reported that their parents were not a consistent source of information about sexual topics and evidence suggests that many parents blatantly avoid talking about sexual topics (Guzman et al., 2003; Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 2000; King & Lorusso, 1997; Sprecher, Harris, & Meyers, 2008). Because we rarely, if ever, get to observe or hear about the sexual negotiations our parents or siblings engage in, and many parents do not have direct family conversations about sex, the ability to be “home-schooled” about sexual topics is limited.

Communication skills that people learn from other areas of life may be generalized to sexual situations, but there are certain factors that make communicating about sexual issues different than communicating about other parts of a relationship. People avoid bringing up sexual issues for fear that it will send a negative message to their partner or make their partner uncomfortable (Cleary, Barham, MacCormack, & Herold, 2002; Cline, Freeman, & Johnson, 1990; Cline, Johnson & Freeman, 1992; Fay & Yanoff, 2000; Herold & Way, 1988; Turk & Hocking, 2005). Because sexuality can be an emotionally charged topic, there is something different when communicating about sexual issues than other relationship topics.

Sexual communication is also something that appears to require specific practice. In studies which interviewed women about sexual communication, participants indicated that they needed practice to feel comfortable talking about sexual issues to their partners (Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002), that feelings of comfort communicating with their partners developed over time (Cleary et al., 2002), and that being more sexually involved with a partner predicted more sexual self-disclosure (Cleary et al., 2002; Herold & Way, 1988). Taken together, these results suggest that people become better at communicating as they get further into a relationship because they are given a chance to become comfortable and develop a skill set for the behavior.

In order to encourage sexual discussion, especially if conversations are to happen prior to sexual interaction, it would be beneficial to provide a context for practice outside of a sexual context.

Sexuality education classes offer an ideal context for teaching sexual communication skills, and providing practice in using those skills. Adolescents who receive training and instruction about how to communicate with their parents about sexual issues, become more adept at it and express more intent to do so (Barth, Fetro, Leland, & Volkan, 1992; Kirby et al., 1991). For adults, going through general marriage classes that included content about relationship communication resulted in increases in positive communication after completing the programs (Nickols, Fournier, & Nickols, 1986; Schilling, Boucom, Burnett, Allen, & Ragland, 2003). In addition, programs that specifically focused on sexually based communication had unique impacts on communication. Marital couples who went through a sexual enrichment program reported more communication about emotional issues than the couples who went through a general communication program or those in the control group (Cooper & Stoltenburg, 1987), and a program for Latinas on HIV prevention empowerment resulted in women feeling higher levels of sexual communication comfort (Gomez, Hernandez, & Faigeles, 1999). Even teachers who already considered themselves sex educators felt more comfortable teaching sexual topics after going through a training program designed to help them talk to their students (Lokanc-Diluzio, Cobb, Harrison, & Nelson, 2007). Programs that teach communication skills also have positive impacts on other sexual behaviors; many of them result in a greater likelihood of students engaging in safer sexual behaviors, such as requiring a condom for intercourse (Flora & Thorensen, 1988; Franklin & Corcoran, 2000).

In an effort to expand on this research, the current study will examine whether teaching communication skills in a sexual education context will result in more ease talking directly to an

intimate partner about a variety of sexual issues. While it is possible that general sex education programs have been teaching these types of skills as part of their curriculum, it is not something that is commonly assessed in program evaluation. Kirby and colleagues (2006) reviewed 83 studies that assessed the effectiveness of sexuality education programs for adolescents. The authors analyzed the number of those evaluations that assessed communication, along with the impact that each program had on communication variables (increasing, decreasing, or no significant impact). Of the 83 programs, only 22 assessed communication of any kind including communication with parents and other adults. Of those 22, seven assessed students' reports of talking with partners, specifically about AIDS, STIs and past partners (four studies reported a significant increase in those behaviors, and three showed no significant effect). Five programs assessed students' reports of talking with partners about abstinence and/or condoms (one study found a significant increase and four found no differences). None of the programs reported a decrease in either type of communication behavior over time. The limited number may be a result of the focus of many sex education programs for adolescents being specifically on reduction of negative sexual outcomes. As communication may be considered more a relationship maintenance skill, it may be left out of programs that do not address having healthy and positive romantic relationships on a broader level. However from these few studies, it seems that including communication education into sex educations may at best help students better communicate and at worst not hurt student's likelihood of communicating.

The current research seeks to actively investigate the link between teaching communication and changing communication behaviors, specifically in regards to communication about sexual topics to sexual partners. If the link between communication skills training and sexual communication behaviors can be established, people may be more apt to see

this training as an important characteristic of education programs. Due to the unique nature of sexual communication, it is expected that teaching communication skills using examples that specifically relate to sexual relationships will help participants see the communication techniques as useful for talking about sexual issues, more so than if communication skills are taught using examples that relate to non-sexual relationship issues. Effective sexuality education programs provide specific information about behaviors that students can use within their relationships, including giving examples of situations where such behaviors would be appropriate or useful (Kirby et al., 2006). Thus, if one wants students to communicate about sexuality within their relationships, it may be important that the communication information be contextualized that way.

Constructivist Learning Theory and Pedagogy

Another goal of the current research is to establish the validity of constructivist learning theory, and more specifically the pedagogy that is based on that theoretical perspective, as a framework for effectively teaching sexual communication. Constructivist learning theory posits that learning is not a passive experience whereby information is simply transmitted from an instructor or a text to the student for memorization but instead that knowledge is created through the integration of new information into an individual's existing world view. Students go through a process of perceiving new material, reflecting on the information, and working that information into the organizational structure of their personal knowledge base, thereby "constructing" their understanding of the world (Fosnot, 1996; Larochelle & Bednarz, 1998; Von Glasersfeld, 1996). The constructivist perspective, the approach to pedagogy that is based on constructivist learning theory, has been used in the teaching of math, science, language arts, and fine arts (Greene, 1996; Gould, 1996; Julyan & Duckworth, 1996; Larochelle & Bednarz, 1998; Phillips, 2000;

Schifter, 1996). Currently, there is no research indicating that it has been applied to the teaching of communication skills or sex education, however, the pedagogy that derives from this perspective is similar to social learning theory in that both require active participation in the learning process, and therefore both may be similarly effective in teaching within the discipline.

As with pedagogical techniques that are based on social learning theory, those using the constructivist perspective emphasize that individuals should play a participatory role in their own learning, and that people learn most effectively when they actively integrate new material into their own personally relevant knowledge structure (Bellefeuille et al., 2005; Fosnot, 1996; Von Glasersfeld, 1996). When applying constructivist learning theory to educational situations, Fosnot (1996) encourages teachers to consider the following learning principles: 1) that learning requires “self-organization” where the student generates their own examples and possible applications, 2) that students should be challenged to think about material in open-ended, realistic contexts so that they can develop ideas that are both complementary and contradictory to what they already understand, 3) that learners need to engage in “reflective abstraction” or the act of creating understandings of information that organize the information within their existing knowledge and allow them to see how the information can be generalized and combined with that existing world view, 4) that personal reflection through writing or discussion will help facilitate reflective abstraction, and 5) that learning includes creating organizing principles that may require developing a different understanding or use of previously learned information.

This difference between active engagement and personal connection and passive reception and memorization is another variable of interest in the current study. To test the impact of personal engagement as it compares to memorization, some participants will simply read information about communication techniques and summarize the information and others will

read the material and complete a writing activity that encourages them to think about how the communication skills could be useful in their own lives. Writing exercises in psychology of gender classes that encourage personal connection with and reflection on course material have been found to increase understanding of course topics (Stewart, Myers, & Culley, 2010). By having participants write about the material they read and how it relates to their own experiences, students will be able to remember the information and create the personal connection emphasized by the constructivist perspective. It is expected that compared to a more traditional, passive format, an educational module which incorporates active learning through personal engagement with the material will result in participants not only having better memory for the information, but developing more of a sense that the information presented in the module would be easy for them to use in various communication contexts.

The examination of the constructivist perspective as a set of guiding principles for sex education may have the potential to expand the teaching formats available to sex educators. Previous research in sex education has been focused on traditional classroom formats, because the teaching methods used in most active learning contexts generally require a classroom setting to administer. For example, programs based on social learning theory include knowledge-building sessions that are integrated with in-class activities and role-playing, which serve to reinforce and model how best to execute the relevant skills (Barth et al., 1992; Kirby et al., 1991). However, given the growing popularity of new technologies, if the core principles associated with effective sex education classes can be tailored to fit online courses, then sexual communication skills could reach a much wider audience, and still facilitate the active engagement and practice necessary for comfort with communication skills. A previous study found constructivism to be an effective model when incorporating active learning into an online

social work course (Bellefeuille, Martin, & Buck, 2005). Using an online educational platform, WebCT, students were able to complete writing and discussion activities that encouraged active learning and engagement, such as using the new course material to analyze case studies from their own previous work experiences. It follows then, that sexual communication skills may be taught online and the active learning component that appears to be so important can be maintained, with the added benefit of being more easily administered to a wide variety of students.

Rationale

The goal of this research was to assess the impact of teaching communication skills within sex education programs using constructivist learning theory as a framework. Communication is an important element in both relationship satisfaction and safer sex behaviors (Meeks et al., 1998; Harper & Welsh, 2007), but little research in the area of sex education has assessed whether sex education programs teach partner communication. There is evidence that the more effective sexuality education programs are those that teach skills related to navigation of sexual relationships, that model open communication, and that use theoretical frameworks which allow for both learning and practice (Franklin & Corcoran, 2000; Jemmott et al. 2010, Kirby et al., 2006). Thus, it follows that sex education programs that use these methods will produce better sexual communication skills than those that do not.

The constructivist perspective holds that a personal connection to any newly acquired information is needed for the highest level of learning to occur and, it can be assumed, for students to subsequently use that information (Larochelle & Bednarz, 1998). Thus it was expected that participants who read the information and participate in an activity that facilitates personal engagement with the material by allowing them to reflect on how the material

specifically relates to their life experiences, would report feeling as though it would be easier for them to use the information in their own relationships, as compared to those in a more passive learning context, where they simply read and summarize the information. In addition, because communicating about sexual topics is essentially different than communicating with a partner about other relationship issues, it was expected that teaching about communication skills in the context of sex education would result in participants seeing the skills as more useful for discussing sexual topics than if they were simply presented with the information as a way to navigate romantic relationships in general.

Statement of Hypotheses

Hypothesis I

There will be a main effect of Learning Activity (personal engagement versus summarization), such that participants in the personal engagement condition will display greater knowledge of the presented communication skills, as measured by the Knowledge Assessment Questionnaire, than those in the summarization condition.

Hypothesis II

There will be a two-way interaction between Example Type (sexual versus non-sexual) and Communication Survey Subscale (general relationship items versus sexual relationship items) on the participants' expected ease using the communication skills, as measured by the Partner Communication Questionnaire. Specifically, regardless of example type, there will be no difference in the change scores for the participants' reporting of their expected ease of talking about general relationship topics. However, participants who are in the sexual example condition

will report greater expected ease talking about the sexual relationship topics than those who were in the non-sexual condition.

Hypothesis III

There will be a three-way interaction between Learning Activity (personal engagement versus summarization), Example Type (non-sexual versus sexual), and Communication Survey Subscale (general relationship items versus sexual relationship items) on the participants' reporting of expected ease using the communication skills, as measured by the Partner Communication Questionnaire. There will be a main effect of the learning activity, such that participants who go through the module with the personal engagement activity will report more ease using the communication skills than those who go through module with the summarization activity. This main effect will be qualified by the interaction. For the summarization activity conditions, it is expected that participants will report greater ease using the communication skills to talk about general relationship topics than sexual relationship topics, regardless of which example they read. However, there will be an effect of example type on the participants' ease using the communication skills to talk about sexual topics. Participants who go through the module that uses the sexual example will report more expected ease using the communication skills than those who go through the module with the non-sexual example.

For the personal engagement conditions, a different pattern of results is expected. Again, it is expected that participants will report greater ease using the communication skills to talk about general relationship topics than sexual relationship topics, regardless of which example they read. Also, there will again be an effect of example type on the participants' ease using the communication skills to talk about sexual topics. However, due to the increased connection to the material, it is expected that participants who complete the module with the sexual example

will report that using the communication skills to talk about sexual relationship topics would be just as easy as communication about general relationship topics. Those who complete the module with the non-sexual example will report much less expected ease than in the other three conditions.

CHAPTER II

METHODS (PILOT STUDY)

The purpose of the first study was to pilot test materials for use in the experimental study, specifically the examples to be used in the educational module and the knowledge questionnaire. First, the pilot study established the characteristics of the couple in the examples. One basic understanding that guided the experimental study was that sexual communication is different than communication about general relationship issues. Therefore, it was expected that if students are presented with communication skills in a sex education context they will be more likely to see the skills as useful for discussing sexual situations in their own lives. In order to manipulate the context in which the communication skills were presented, participants read about a fictional couple and a concern that one of the individuals in the couple had about their relationship.

Because, there are gender roles that can come into play when thinking about relationships, and even more so when thinking about sexual relationships, it is important to establish whether a communication situation is perceived differently if the person raising the concern is male or female. For example, as women are sometimes viewed as less sexually aggressive than men, it is possible that participants could view a female raising a sexual concern as a less realistic situation than a male raising a sexual concern. Therefore, one purpose of the pilot study was to establish and compare participants' perceptions of different relationship scenarios, while manipulating the gender of the main actor in the scenario. To this end, participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of a couple, Michael and Michelle. Some participants read a scenario where Michael was the main actor, or the one raising concerns about the relationship, and others read a scenario where Michelle was the main actor. Participants were

then asked to indicate the extent to which the main actors concerns were reasonable and appropriate to the situation.

The second purpose of the pilot study was to establish if people perceive the relationship scenarios differently if the person in the relationship that is raising the concern is of the same or other gender as compared to their own. As one of the goals of the experimental study was to determine the effect of forming a personal connection with the presented material on participants' perceptions of the communication skills, it is important to establish whether the gender of the person raising the concern influences the participants' ability to identify with that person. It is possible that people might see the problems of a member of the other gender to be problems that are not relevant to themselves. Therefore, participants were also asked to indicate the extent to which they identified with the actor in the example relationship.

The third purpose of the pilot study was to pretest a number of possible items intended to assess participants' knowledge of the communication skills presented in the module. When designing assessment items, there is always the possibility that one or more items may be worded poorly, be too easy, or be too difficult. An item that has any of these problems cannot truly differentiate between those that have knowledge of the topic and those that do not, and so is a common practice amongst educators to evaluate the quality of test questions. Thus, participants also responded to a number of questions that were possible items for the knowledge assessment, in order to establish which items would differentiate most effectively between those that have learned the material and those that have not.

Participants

The 271 participants were 84 men and 187 women recruited through the DePaul Introductory Psychology Pool. Of those participants, 60% identified as White/Caucasian, 20% as

Latino(a), 8% as Black/African American, 7% as Asian American/Pacific Islander, 1% as Middle Eastern, and 4% as Multiracial. In regards to the sexual orientation of the participants, 93% of the participants identified as heterosexual/straight, 3% as Gay/Lesbian, 3% as bisexual, and 1% as something other than those categorizations. The mean age of participants was 19.81, with a range of 17 to 39 years.

In terms of relationship variables, 125 participants reported that they were currently in a romantic relationship, with a mean length of 21.74 months (or about 2 years, 7 months), and a range of 1 month to 144 months (or 12 years). Of the 144 not currently in relationship, 116 reported that they had been in at least one romantic relationship at some point in their lives. Additionally, 167 of the participants reported that they were currently in a sexually active relationship, which for the purpose of this study meant participating in any sexual interactions, such as kissing, fondling, oral sex, sexual intercourse, etc. with any short term or long term partners. Of the 104 who were not, 75 reported that they had been in a sexually active relationship at some point in their lives. Finally, 138 participants reported that they were currently in a sexual relationship that included sexual intercourse. Of the 133 who were not, 62 reported that they had been in a sexually active relationship that included sexual intercourse at some point in their lives.

Materials and Procedure

All participants completed the pilot study online. After they agreed to participate in the study, a function in the submit button on the information page randomly assigned them to view one of four sets of webpages. The first page in each set included the scenarios that described a couple trying to navigate the ups and downs of a romantic relationship (see Appendix A). In the experimental study, participants read an educational module that presents information about a

variety of communications skills that can be used within romantic relationships (see Appendix B). However, instead of simply providing the communication information in the abstract, many of the sections of the module are illustrated by explaining how a specific couple, Michael and Michelle, might be able to use the communication techniques described in that section to better their relationship. In general, the couple is described as being happy in the relationship; nevertheless, in each situation one of the partners has a problem in need of being addressed that has not yet been discussed by the pair.

In addition to providing illustration of the concepts, the main purpose of the examples in the educational module was to manipulate the context within which the communication information was presented. In the experimental study the education module included one complete set of examples that either illustrate how the communication skills presented can be used to talk about non-sexual relationship issues or sexual relationship issues. In the non-sexual relationship condition, the couple has started spending less time together and one of the two partners is unhappy about their lack of contact. In the sexual relationship condition, one of the partners feels that they have gotten into a sexual rut and is unhappy about the lack of variation in their sexual behavior. The scenarios presented to the participants in the pilot study were all variations of the introductory paragraph that introduces the couple to the readers in the full experimental module. Of the four scenarios presented to the pilot study participants, there were two scenarios in which one of the members of the couple wants to address a non-sexual relationship issue and two in which the person wants to address a sexual issue (see Appendix A).

The second manipulation within the pilot study was the gender of the main actor in the scenario. Because of the gender roles inherent in the understanding of sexuality and relationships, it is possible that participants will view a male actor and female actor differently,

even if their situations are identical. Additionally, it is possible that the gender of the main actor may also play a part in the participant's ability to identify with the main actor. Thus, for each of the two types of scenarios, non-sexual and sexual, there was one scenario that presented Michelle as the main actor and one where Michael was the main actor. In this study, the main actor was the member of the couple who had a concern about the relationship, as well as the one who sought to initiate a change in that relationship. All language that did not refer to the gender of the participant was held constant for the two non-sexual scenarios and the two sexual scenarios. In addition, to the extent that it was possible, the wording was held constant across the type of example, so that all four scenarios were as similar as possible.

After reading one of the four scenarios, the participants responded to a series of questions designed to assess their responses to what they read (see Appendix A). The first four questions were designed to assess the participants' perceptions of the main actor in the scenario (*How much do you like Michael?*), their perceptions of the main actor's concern (e.g. *Given the situation, how reasonable is it that Michael wants to change the way his relationship with Michelle is going?*), their perceptions of the change the actor wants to make (e.g. *Given the situation, how reasonable is the suggested change Michael wants to make to the relationship?*), and appraisal of how frequently that type of situation occurs (e.g. *How common do you think Michael's situation is?*).

A fifth question assessed the extent to which the participants identified with the main actor in the scenario (e.g. *To what extent do you identify with Michael's point of view in this situation?*). All of these items will use a 7 point bipolar scale, with 1 labeled as "not at all" and 7 labeled as "very much so." Additionally, each participant was presented with a set of questions that used names and pronouns that corresponded with the information in the scenario they read.

A final open-ended question (e.g. *What additional comments, if any, do you have about the situation that Michael is in?*) asked participants to provide any additional impressions of the actor that were not addressed in the scaled items. This was intended to allow for the identification of any other possible characteristics or impressions of the scenario that might impact the ability of the participants in the experimental study to identify with the couple in the example.

After completing the questions about the scenario, the participants were taken to a second webpage, where they were asked to answer a series of questions about communication skills that can be used in romantic relationships (See Appendix C). In the experimental study, the change in participants' knowledge level of information was assessed using a set of multiple choice items. These items were included in the pilot study, because when developing learning or knowledge assessments, it is important to assure that the items truly differentiate between those who have learned material and those who have not. Often, amongst the multiple items in an assessment, there will be some that fail to do so. These are traditionally identified as individual items that a high percentage of respondents answer correctly or incorrectly. Items may fail to differentiate due to a number of factors. In some cases, items may be so straight forward that any participant who went through the learning task could answer them. Items may ask questions that do not specifically assess the educational material, but instead can be answered based on common knowledge that the respondents acquired outside of the learning situation. In other cases, there may be some items that are poorly worded so that the question is confusing, or so that the distracter items are so similar to the correct response that it is difficult for the respondents to clearly distinguish between them.

In order to prevent the inclusion of such items in the experimental study, the participants in the pilot study were presented with 15 multiple choice questions. Of those questions, eight asked about definitions and terms that are presented in the communication module (items 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 14), and seven presented a communication scenario and asked the participants to indicate which skill or behavior was represented in that novel situation (items, 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, 13, and 15). Each item had four response options, with one correct response.

After completing the two tasks, the participants filled out a demographics page. The final questionnaire asked participants to provide information about their gender, age race/ethnicity, religion/faith, sexual orientation, and political affiliation (See Appendix D). In addition, they were asked to indicate whether they were currently in a relationship, and if so, to indicate the length of the relationship in months. Finally, there was also an item so that those were not in a relationship and who had never been in a romantic relationship could indicate that.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS (PILOT STUDY)

The first set of data analyzed responses to questions about the introductory scenarios. To check for differences between the perceptions of the male and female actors, and how those perceptions were influenced by the content of the scenario or the gender of the participant, a 2 (Male Actor vs. Female Actor) X 2 (Sexual vs. Non-sexual) X 2 (Male Participant vs. Female Participant) univariate Analysis of Variance was run for each of the scaled survey items.

Three items of the survey asked participants to indicate how they viewed the main actor (Michael or Michelle) and the situation that he or she was in. There were no significant main effects or interactions for the participant's ratings of how much they liked him or her, $F(7, 262) = 2.12, p = \text{n.s.}, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.054$, how reasonable it was for the main actor to want to change the situation he or she was in, $F(7, 263) = 0.25, p = \text{n.s.}, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.007$ or how reasonable the proposed change to the situation was, $F(7, 263) = 0.82, p = \text{n.s.}, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.021$.

One item asked the participants how common the situation described in the scenario was. There was a main effect of Participant Gender, $F(1, 261) = 12.60, p < 0.001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.046$, such women viewed the situations as more common ($M = 6.23, SD = 1.07$) than males ($M = 5.75, SD = 1.18$). This main effect was qualified by an interaction between Participant Gender and the type of situation, $F(1, 261) = 4.34, p = 0.04, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.016$, such that men who read about Michelle believed that the situation was less common ($M = 5.53, SD = 1.36$) than men who read about Michael ($M = 5.91, SD = 1.00$), women who read about Michelle ($M = 6.34, SD = 0.85$), and women who read about Michael ($M = 6.13, SD = 1.22$), whose ratings did not significantly differ from each other. None of the other main effects or interactions were significant.

One item asked the participants how much they could identify with the main actor in the scenario. There was a significant main effect for the Communication Topic, $F(1, 260) = 7.15$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.027$, such that participants who read about the non-sexual relationship situation ($M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.77$) identified more with the main actor than the participants who read about the sexual situation ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.83$).

The second set of analyses evaluated the knowledge assessment items. Any item that fewer than 5-10% of the participants answered correctly or 90-95% of the participants answer correctly was reevaluated. Only one item, item 12, was found to be in these ranges; only 5% of the participants answered this item correctly. Item 12 was reviewed, and it was determined that the question was incorrectly worded. The word “not” was added to the item to correct the valance of the question so that it matched the response options.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION (PILOT STUDY)

The purpose of the pilot study was to evaluate the materials designed for use in the experimental study, in order to maximize the effectiveness of the module. Specifically, the couple scenarios, that described the relationship concerns of Michael and Michelle, needed to be as broadly identifiable as possible. Given the differing gender roles and norms for males and females in this society, it is always possible that people will interpret the same actions performed by males and females in different ways. For example, it is possible that a female wanting to “spice up their sex life” might be seen as more aggressive or nagging and less likable than a male doing the same thing. In order to reveal any impacts of the gender of the participant and the gender of the actor, participants read scenarios that had either Michael or Michelle as the main actor (the individual with concerns about the relationship) and then rated their responses to the scenarios on a number of dimensions.

Overall, the perceptions of the actors were not influenced by the gender of the participant or the gender of the actor. There were no differences in participants’ ratings of how much they liked the main actor, how reasonable it was for the main actor to want to make a change in the relationship based on the given situation, or the extent to which they thought the actual changes that the main actor wanted to make were reasonable. The manner in which gender did have an effect was related to commonness of the situation. Males who read about Michelle indicated that they thought that the situation was slightly less common than the participants in the other conditions. It may be that the men in this group believed that it is unlikely that a woman would not speak up when she was unhappy with her situation. However, regardless of the reason, the difference was relatively small. Additionally, as one of the goals of the experimental study was

to facilitate personal engagement and connections with the material, it was important to maximize the ability of participants to see similarities between themselves and the actor in the scenario. Again, given the gender roles related to relationships and sexuality it was possible that participants might identify less with someone of the other gender, or that they would interpret issues that a member of the other gender expressed as irrelevant to themselves. However, there were no interactive effects of the gender of the participant and the gender of the actor on participants' ability to identify with the main actor. As a result of these combined findings, the scenarios were determined to be largely similar to each other, and participants in the experimental study all read scenarios where Michelle was the main actor.

One unexpected but potentially interesting finding was a main effect for the type of example for the participants identification with the main actor's situation. Specifically, it was found that participants identified more with the main actor when they wanted to discuss a non-sexual relationship than when they wanted to discuss a sexual issue with their partner. This is in line with the previous literature that suggests that there is something that makes sexual situations, issues, and communication distinct from general relationship issues and communication (Byers & Demmons, 1999; MacNeil & Byers, 2009; Meeks et al., 1998, Turk & Hocking, 2005; Widman et al., 2006).

The pilot study was also used to pretest the items on the knowledge questionnaire to assure that it is a good measure, made up of items that distinguish between those individuals that learned the material and those that did not. Pretesting these items verified that none of the items were so easy that a majority of participants could answer them without going through the module, nor were any so difficult that the none of the participants could answer them correctly (given that some participants were likely coming into the pilot study with preexisting knowledge

of communication skills, it was expected that at least some of the participants should be able to correctly answer each of the individual items). The item analysis also identified confusing wording in one item, which was clarified. The result of this process was a 15 item measure that assesses knowledge of the communication skills presented in the experimental module.

CHAPTER V

METHODS (EXPERIMENTAL STUDY)

The experimental study used a 2 (Example Type: non-sexual example versus sexual example) X 2 (Learning Activity: personal engagement versus summarization) X 2 (Communication Survey Subscale: general relationship items versus sexual relationship items) mixed-model design. Example Type and Learning Activity were between-participants independent variables, while Type of Communication was a within-participants variable. The dependent variables were the participants' knowledge of the communication information presented in the module and the ease with which participants expect to be able use the communication skills with their partners.

Participants

The 75 participants were 14 men and 51 women, and 1 transgendered individual recruited through the DePaul Introductory Psychology Pool. Of those participants, 71% identified as White/Caucasian, 13% as Latino(a), 8% as Black/African American, 3% as Asian American/Pacific Islander, 2% as Middle Eastern, and 3% as Multiracial. In regards to the sexual orientation of the participants, 91% of the participants identified as heterosexual/straight, 8% as Gay/Lesbian, and 1% as something other than those categorizations. The mean age of participants was 19.68, with a range of 18 to 40 years.

In terms of relationship variables, 47 participants reported that they were currently in a romantic relationship, with a mean length of 17.49 months (or about 1 year, 6 months), and a range of 0.25 months to 68 months (or 5 years, 8 months). Of the 28 not currently in a relationship, 23 reported that they had been in at least one romantic relationship at some point in their lives. Additionally, 56 of the participants reported that they were currently in a sexually

active relationship, which for the purpose of this study meant participating in any sexual interactions, such as kissing, fondling, oral sex, sexual intercourse, etc. with any short term or long term partners. Of the 19 who were not, 14 reported that they had been in a sexually active relationship at some point in their lives. Finally, 44 participants reported that they were currently in a sexual relationship that included sexual intercourse. Of the 31 who were not, 16 reported that they had been in a sexually active relationship that included sexual intercourse at some point in their lives.

Materials

The materials consisted of the educational module that presented the communication skills information, using examples that demonstrate the skills for sexual topics or general relationship topics. This module also included the two different sets of writing activities. Participants all completed a knowledge assessment, a questionnaire about the ease of communication with a partner, and a demographics questionnaire.

Communication Educational Module

As previously stated, the purpose of the communication module is to provide information on communication skills that are appropriate for navigating romantic relationships. The information was presented through a series of webpages that make up an online learning module. The material and skills in the module were collected and summarized based on the information covered in the communication sections of college level human sexuality textbooks (Carroll, 2006; Crooks & Baur, 2008; Hock, 2007; Hyde & DeLamater, 2008; Rathus, Nevid, & Fitchner-Rathus, 2008). The materials included provide information about a number of communication topics: why communication is important, what less effective communication often looks like, and

some effective verbal communication skills that might be of use to the reader for navigating communication in relationships.

Each heading in the document included for review purposes represents one page in the series of webpages that make up the module, formatted in a style of web based text that is sometimes used for on-line learning in classes at the college level. Students view one page at a time, each of which has all the information included in the review document under a single bolded heading. After reading all the information on one page, they are able to select a “next page” button or a “previous page” button. The linked screen then displays all the information included under the next (or previous) bolded heading in the review document. Participants are able to go forward and back, just as if they were reading a textbook.

The introduction to the communication module is two pages that present why good communication is important, why communication within romantic relationships can be especially challenging, and what information will be presented in the module. Readers are informed that that not all people use negative communication techniques described and that some of the information that they get within the module may be familiar to them, but that the text is written to inform even those who have little to no knowledge of objectively effective communication skills. It is also conveyed to the readers that the communication skills presented in the module are not the only ways to communicate with a partner, but are a representation of some common approaches that specifically relate to verbal communication.

This section also includes the introduction of the couple, Michael and Michelle, who are talked about in the examples throughout the module. The exact introductory paragraphs that are used will be dependent upon the results of the pilot study. However, regardless of the exact details, the purpose of the examples remains consistent. The examples provide a context to

demonstrate possible uses of the skills, so that the information is not presented in an abstract manner. Examples of less effective communication are often given first, followed by an example of more effective communication. Using a single couple to illustrate the different communication techniques allows the reader to see how various techniques can be used by the same couple in different situations, and even how in some particular relationship situations there may be more than one option for communicating with a partner.

The names Michael and Michelle were chosen to leave the race or ethnicity of the two individuals nondescript, by choosing names that are not strongly associated with one ethnicity or culture in particular. In addition, the couple is heterosexual, which is considered appropriate for this study, as the majority of the participants are also heterosexual. However, in order to emphasize to readers of the module that the techniques are appropriate in many different scenarios, there is a statement in the introductory section emphasizing that while one couple will be used as an example throughout, the skills and information are useful for a variety of people and situations.

The second section of the module is three pages which presents the idea that people do not always communicate effectively and then identifies some of the more common communication mistakes that people make: avoiding communication entirely, emotionally shutting down and refusing to discuss an issue, taking every attempt to communicate as an attack, and constantly blaming the other person for the issues. This section is essential; while it is beneficial to know what types of skills may be more effective, it is also important to be able to identify patterns of behaviors that may be less effective, that one is attempting to avoid or change.

The third section is one of two sections detailing effective verbal communication skills. This section is six pages that detail ways to speak to a partner. It includes information on the techniques of creating a space and time for communication, making the impact and intent of the message match, being direct with ones partner about what one wants, and softening complaints with positive feedback. The fourth section is three pages that detail ways to effectively listen when one's partner is trying to communicate, including using active listening skills, and making sure one understands the messages being sent by paraphrasing the other person's points or asking clarifying questions to clear up uncertainty or confusion. The final two pages of the module focus on the interactive nature of communication, and the need for compromise within relationships to effectively resolve issues, along with a summary statement that reinforces the idea that the communication skills described can be used in many situations by many types of people.

Example Type

The context within which the communication information was presented was manipulated through the content of the examples used to illustrate the communication skills presented (see Appendix B). As was mentioned previously, the couple in the scenario is Michael and Michelle, and as per the results of the pilot study, Michelle is always the main actor in the scenarios. However, in one set of examples Michelle is concerned about a sexual aspect of her relationship with Michael (that they are in a sexual rut) and in the other she is concerned about a non-sexual aspect of their relationship (that they don't spend enough time together). Participants were assigned to view one of the two types of example sets.

Learning Activity

The way in which material was reflected upon by the participants was manipulated, such that some participants engaged in an activity that encourages personal engagement with the material while others were simply asked to summarize information (see Appendix B). At the end of each section of the modules, those in the personal engagement conditions were instructed to write about how the communication information could apply to their own lives and experiences. The personal engagement activities are based in constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of students creating personal connections and using active practice in order to incorporate new information into their current knowledge structure. Providing this series of writing tasks creates a specific, structured way for this connection to occur, and it guides the readers' reflections in a similar way to the methods an instructor in a classroom setting might guide an assignment or discussion of material. For example, at the end of the first section of the module, which discusses negative communication habits, the participants were asked to reflect on whether they have experienced any of the communication pitfalls discussed in the section and their perceptions about the effects of those behaviors on their relationship or relationships. After each section of the communication module which presents the encouraged communication skills, the participants were asked to reflect on what skills stood out to them as being useful in their own relationships and why they think those skills in particular would be useful. In all situations the participants were encouraged to write about specific examples from their own experiences. Those in the summarization groups were asked to write down a summary of the material they just read at the end of each section of the modules, providing as much information about specific communication skills as they could.

Knowledge Assessment

The change in participants' knowledge level was assessed using a number of multiple choice items. Some items assessed participants' knowledge of concepts presented in the educational module directly. Other items assessed their ability to apply the concepts to new situations. The final knowledge assessment has 15 items, all of which were pilot tested and determined to be sound assessment items (see Appendix C). As stated in the pilot study, eight asked about definitions and terms (items 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, and 14), and seven presented a scenario and asked the participants indicate the skill needed or represented in that novel situation (items, 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, 13, and 15).

These questions assessed learning, but were also an instrumental element of the methodology designed to motivate the participants to complete the reading. While, the text is similar in length to a chapter in a college level text book, it is a more significant amount of reading than most research participants anticipate. Thus, participants were informed as part of the information session prior to beginning the study that a VISA gift card was being offered as an incentive to encourage the participants to not only complete the reading, but to be attentive to the content. For each item that a participant answered correctly, they were given one entry into a drawing for the gift card. Thus, the more closely they read the material and the more they retained the information the more chances they had to win the gift card. After the data collection was complete, participants' confidential participant codes (assigned by the university experiment management system) were put into a database the appropriate number of times. A single participant code was selected randomly by the program, and that participant was contacted.

Partner Communication Questionnaire

This questionnaire was designed to assess the ease with which participants believe they could use the verbal communication skills they know to talk to a partner about their relationship (see Appendix C). This scale is also the basis for the within-participants variable Communication Survey Subscale. For each of seven types of situations, there is an item that represents a non-sexual context and an item that represents a sexual context. The items on each of the two subscales were averaged into the Sexual Communication subscale ($\alpha = 0.82$), that assesses the participants' perceived ease using the communication skills to talk to a partner about sexual topics, and the General Communication subscale ($\alpha = 0.72$), that represents the participants' perceived ease using the communication skills to talk to a partner about non-sexual topics.

Each pair of items was designed to keep wording as consistent as possible across the two contexts. Items three and six ask about the ease with which the participant could propose a new activity to do as a couple. Items four and twelve ask about the ease with which the participant could express dissatisfaction with the frequency of interactions with a partner. Items five and ten ask about the ease with which the participant could talk to their partner about setting boundaries within their relationship. Items one and nine ask about the ease with which the participant could bring up something that their partner does that they do not like. Items two and fourteen ask about the ease with which the participant could bring up something that a partner does that makes him or her happy. Items eight and eleven ask about the ease with which the participant could ask a partner about something that appears to be bothering him or her. Items seven and thirteen ask about the ease with which the participant could bring up a topic to which a partner may respond negatively. Collectively the two groups of 7 items make up the sexual and general relationship

subscales. All ratings are on a 6-point bipolar scale, with 1 labeled as “Very Difficult” and 6 labeled as “Very Easy.”

Demographics

The demographic questionnaire was identical to the one used in the pilot study (see Appendix D). As before, participants were asked to provide information about their gender, age race/ethnicity, religion/faith, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and relationship status.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete two stages of the experimental study. The first consisted of filling out the pretest measures. The second was a lab session where they read the communication skills module, completed the learning activities, and filled out the posttest measures. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the four scenarios, and while random assignment within the manipulation is designed to control for individual differences, a pretest/posttest design assures that any differences between the preexisting knowledge of or ease using the communication skills for the groups are controlled for. This method better allowed for the detection of differences between the educational impacts of the various conditions. Additionally, it is common to use a pretest/posttest design in educational research because random assignment is not commonly possible. Thus, a this design was also intended to provide a more familiar design for those in the educational realm who may potentially use the results of this research to make decisions about program implementation.

The pretest, which included the knowledge assessment, the partner communication questionnaire, and the demographics page, was completed online in the setting of the participants’ choice. The data from the pretest established a baseline for each participant, in order

to control for individual differences. It was anticipated that while some participants would have little to no knowledge about formal communication skills, some would have received information from other sources. In addition, it was expected that some participants were more comfortable talking to their partners about relationship issues, sexual or non-sexual, than others. After completing the pretest, participants were encouraged to sign up for the lab portion of the study. Participants were required to leave at least one week between the date that they completed the pretest, and the date that they completed the lab sessions. The average time span between the two sessions was 15.19 days, with a minimum of 7 days and a maximum of 120 days (17.14 weeks or 4.29 months). The signups were actively monitored, and participants that initially signed up for a lab session that did not meet the one week criteria were contacted and asked to sign up for a different session. As a result, none of the participants who completed the lab portion of the study had to be excluded from the analyses for violating this one week criteria.

For the lab portion of the study, sessions were run by the lead researcher or one of four trained undergraduate research assistants. Procedures and verbal instructions were written out in a script followed during each session, in order to maintain consistency. In all sessions, participants were seated at individual computer consoles. Some participants completed the lab portion of the study in large computer labs equipped with 25-30 computers. In these labs, participants were staggered among the rows of computers and seated in ways that prevented them from reading the responses other participants entered. The number of participants in these sessions ranged from 1 – 12. Other participants completed the lab portion in a small computer lab, equipped with 5 computers with privacy walls on each side. The number of participants in these sessions ranged from 1 – 4.

Each computer had the introductory page of the website preloaded, and participants were told to select any computer that had the website loaded when they arrived. They were given instructions to read the information page about the study and to indicate that they consented to participate in the study by clicking on a button on the interdictions page that indicated this. When this button is selected, one of four title pages randomly loads for the participant to read, which were the beginning pages for the four different variations of the module. This method of random assignment prevented the study session administrators from knowing which of the four conditions each participant was in.

After giving consent, and immediately before beginning the module, participants were given final instructions, including a reminder of the incentive structure and that they were free to go through the module at their own pace, and that they should type their responses to the reflection activities in the boxes provided as part of the series of webpages. At the end of the module, participants were asked to fill out the same knowledge assessment, partner communication questionnaire, and demographics page as they completed during the pretest, using the online survey system linked to the end of the educational module. In order to prevent the participants from going back to look up the relevant information, once the participants opened the initial page of the knowledge assessment they were no longer be able to navigate back into the communication module. All participants were given two and a half hours to complete the module, questions, and activities.

CHAPTER VI

RESULTS (EXPERIMENTAL STUDY)

To test Hypothesis I, a 2 X 2 mixed-measures analysis of variance was used, with the Learning Activity (Personal Engagement vs. Summarization) as the between-participants independent variable, and the performance scores on the knowledge assessment (pretest vs. posttest) as the within-participants independent variable knowledge assessment. To establish that all participants regardless of condition demonstrated improved knowledge of communication skills as a result of going through the module, an analysis was performed that yielded a main effect for knowledge such that posttest scores ($M = 11.51$, $SD = 1.72$) were indeed higher than pretest ones ($M = 9.56$, $SD = 1.90$), $F(1, 73) = 72.55$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.534$, for all participants.

Hypothesis I, predicted that there would be a main effect of learning activity, such that those in the Personal Engagement condition would learn more of the material, but contrary to expectations there was no main effect found, $F(1, 73) = 0.004$, $p = \text{n.s.}$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.001$. There were no other main effects or interactions for the scores on the knowledge questionnaire.

To test the second hypotheses, which predicted a two-way interaction between the Example Type (Sexual vs. Non-sexual) and the Communication Survey Subscales (Sexual vs. General), and the third hypothesis, which predicted a three-way interaction between Example Type, Communication Survey Subscale, and Learning Activity, mixed-measures analyses of covariance were performed, with Example Type and Learning Activity as the between-participants independent variables, and the Communication Survey Subscales as the within-participants independent variable, holding the pre-test scores on the two ease of use subscales constant to control for the participants' level of ease with the different types of communication

prior to going through the module. The dependant variable was how easy the participants thought it would be to talk to a relationship partner. Significant covariate relationships were found for the pretest scores of both the general communication subscale, $F(1, 69) = 8.807, p = 0.004$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.113$, and the sexual communication subscale, $F(1, 69) = 18.813, p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.214$.

Hypothesis II predicted a two-way interaction between Example Type (sexual versus non-sexual) and Communication Survey Subscale (general relationship items versus sexual relationship items) on the participants' expected ease using the communication skills, such that regardless of example type there would be no difference in participants' reports of their expected ease talking about general relationship topics. However, participants who were in the Sexual Example condition were expected to report that it would be easier to talk about the sexual relationship topics than those who were in the Non-sexual Example condition. No significant interaction was found, $F(1, 69) = 0.186, p = \text{n.s.}$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.003$.

Hypothesis III predicted a three-way interaction between Learning Activity, Example Type, and the Communication Survey Subscale on the participants' reporting of anticipated ease using the communication skills. An embedded main effect of the learning activity was expected, such that participants who went through the module with the Personal Engagement activity would report that it would be easier for them to use the communication skills than those who went through the module with the Summarization Activity, and the main effect was expected to be qualified by the interaction. Specifically, for the summarization activity conditions, participants were expected to report greater ease using the communication skills to talk about general relationship topics than sexual relationship topics, regardless of which example they read. However, it was hypothesized there would be an effect of Example Type on the participants' ease using the communication skills in discussing sexual topics. Participants who

read the module with the Sexual Example were expected to report more ease using the communication skills than those who read the module with Non-sexual example. For the personal engagement conditions, a different pattern of results was hypothesized. Participants were expected to report greater ease using the communication skills to talk about general relationship topics than sexual relationship topics, regardless of which example they read. Also predicted was that Sexual Topic participants would express greater ease in using the communication skills to talk about sex; however, due to the increased personal engagement, participants who complete the module with the sexual example were expected to report that using the communication skills to talk about topics related to sex would be just as easy as using the skills to communicate about general relationship topics. Those who completed the module with the non-sexual examples were expected to report less ease than any of those in the other three conditions. There was no significant main effect of learning activity, $F(1, 69) = 0.990$, $p = \text{n.s}$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.014$, or significant interaction, $F(1, 69) = 1.109$, $p = \text{n.s}$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.016$, and thus the hypothesis was not supported.

While the hypothesized differences were not demonstrated, there was a significant two-way interaction between the Learning Activity and the Example type, $F(1, 69) = 4.196$, $p = 0.04$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.057$. Specifically, participants who went through the module with the Sexual Example and who also summarized the information indicated that they would be more at ease in using the communication skills to talk to a partner about relationship issues overall, than would participants in any of the other conditions.

Table 1
Participants Ratings of Ease of Use: Learning Activity X Example Type

Learning Activity	Example Type			
	Sexual		Non-Sexual	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Personal Engagement	4.76 ^a	0.66	4.87 ^a	0.47
Summarization	5.16 ^b	0.51	4.88 ^a	0.63

Note. Higher values indicate more anticipated ease using the communication skills to talk to a partner. Different letters indicate significant differences, $p < 0.05$.

These results, while not directly in line with the hypotheses, do indicate support for the idea that there is something unique about learning communication skills in a context related to sexual communication.

In order to further investigate statistical relationships, additional exploratory analyses were performed. In order to look more specifically at the impact of the manipulations on participant's ease talking about sexual relationship topics and general relationship topics independently, a 2 X 2 between-participants Analyses of Covariance were run on each for each subscale, with Learning Activity and Example Type as the independent variables and the participant's anticipated ease using the communication skills as the dependant variables, holding the pretest scores on the appropriate subscale constant.

For the general communication subscale, the pretest was a significant covariate, $F(1, 70) = 35.416, p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.336$. There was a main effect of Learning Activity, $F(1, 70) = 4.701, p = 0.03$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.063$, such that the participants who went through the module with

the Summarization Activity ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 0.57$) reported more anticipated ease using the communication skills than the participants who did the Personal Engagement activity ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.68$). There was not a significant main effect of Example Type, $F(1, 70) = 0.224$, $p = \text{n.s.}$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.003$ or interaction, $F(1, 70) = 1.398$, $p = \text{n.s.}$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.020$.

For the sexual communication subscale, the pretest was again a significant covariate, $F(1, 70) = 62.040$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.470$. There was no significant main effect of Learning Activity, $F(1, 70) = 0.000$, $p = \text{n.s.}$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.000$, or Example Type, $F(1, 70) = 1.170$, $p = \text{n.s.}$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.016$. However, there was a significant interaction, $F(1, 70) = 5.774$, $p = 0.019$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.076$, which followed the same pattern as the previous two-way interaction, such that the participants who read the module with the sexual example and also did the summarization activity reported more ease using the communication skills than the participants in the other three conditions.

Table 2
Participants Ratings of Ease of Use on the Sexual Communication Subscale: Learning Activity X Example Type

Learning Activity	Example Type			
	Sexual		Non-Sexual	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Personal Engagement	4.63 ^a	0.87	4.95 ^a	0.64
Summarization	5.20 ^b	0.62	4.91 ^a	0.75

Note. Higher values indicate more anticipated ease using the communication skills to talk to a partner. Different letters indicate significant differences, $p < 0.05$.

As this pattern of results follows the blueprint of the previous interaction that collapsed across the two communication subscales, it is likely that the results of the previous analysis were driven by the effect of the manipulation on the Sexual Communication subscale.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION (EXPERIMENTAL STUDY)

There is something uniquely challenging when it comes to talking about sexual issues with a partner. These are conversations that carry a high risk of vulnerability and fear that partners will respond negatively if high voltage topics like sex are brought up in conversation. This uniqueness is also somewhat supported by the results of the pilot study, in that participants more closely identified with the point of view of the actor in the general relationship scenario than the sexual scenario, possibly indicating more familiarity or understanding of situations that require general relationship communication. However, evidence tying sexual communication to relationship success indicates that while scary, uncomfortable, and unfamiliar, sexual communication is also uniquely important.

Given the unique nature of sexual communication, the goals of the experimental study were twofold. The first goal was to investigate whether teaching communication skills in the context of sex education courses will provide students with an increased ability to talk about sexual topics with a sexual partner. In order to manipulate the educational context, some participants read a module about a couple's relationship that included sexual examples and some read a module with nonsexual examples. The second goal was to evaluate the usefulness of pedagogy based on constructivist learning theory (Bellefeuille et al., 2005; Fosnot, 1996) as a tool for structuring effective sex education classes. To this end, some participants reflected on the material in terms of how it would be relevant to their own lives and some simply summarized the information they read. Overall, it was hypothesized that teaching communication skills within the context of sex education courses, especially when participants were given the chance to make personal connections with the material would impact both participants' knowledge of

communication skills and their perceived ease talking about sexual relationship issues with a partner.

One important finding of the experimental study is that participants did gain knowledge about communication skills as a result of going through the communication module. Posttest scores on the knowledge questionnaire were significantly higher than the pretest scores, across conditions. This indicates that if the main goal of a communication skills training program is to increase knowledge, then teaching the skills in or outside of sex education classes would be equally effective, and that giving the students either the personal reflection activities or the summarization activities will result in them learning the material. However, the same cannot be said for the impact that the module had on the participant's perceptions of how easy it would be to put the skills into practice.

In addition to the impact of the module on communication knowledge, the results of this study provided partial support for the interactive effects between the type of example, the learning activity, and the type of communication on participants' perceived ability to use the communication skills, as laid out in the second and third hypotheses. Specifically, participants in all conditions were expected to report that general communication would be easier than sexual communication, but those participants who read about the couple who were discussing sexual issues were expected to feel more at ease using the newly acquired skills to talk about sexual topics than those who read the nonsexual examples. Additionally, the combination of the personal engagement activity and the sexual examples was expected to have a particularly strong impact, such that the participants in that condition would be equally at ease using the communication skills to talk about sexual and general relationship topics.

The initial analysis of the data failed to reveal any significant differences between the participants' perceptions of how easy it would be to talk about sexual and general relationship topics. In fact, the results indicated that participants found both types of communication would be relatively easy to use, with the means for both types of communication coming in well above the midpoint of the scale. Despite the lack of difference between the two communication topics, an interaction between learning activity and example type revealed that one particular combination of these two independent variables resulted in more anticipated ease than any of the other possible groupings. The participants who viewed the sexual example and did the summarization activity thought it would be easier to talk to a partner about both kinds of relationship issues than participants in the other three groups, which were all similar to each other. This pattern is only partially in the direction that was hypothesized, as it was anticipated that the personal engagement activity would create the most ease. However, these results still indicate that the sexual example, when it is combined with a particular type of learning activity, has a unique impact.

The supplemental analyses, which looked at the two communication topic subscales separately, provide a more nuanced picture of the pattern of results, revealing differences between the nature of sexual communication and general communication, and the ways in which the type of example and type of learning activity predict ease communicating with a partner in respect to the different types of communication. Although the fact that the summarization activity resulted in higher levels of ease communicating with a partner is contrary to the hypotheses, the impact of the summarization activity follows a similar pattern to the one actually hypothesized for the personal engagement activity. Specifically, doing the summarization activities facilitated an equal level of ease talking about general relationship topics, across the

type of example. However, for sexual relationship topics, the combination of the summarization and the sexual examples had a unique impact, such that participants in that condition felt more ease than participants in any other condition, who all reported equal levels of ease. This follows the prediction that facilitating easy communication about sexual topics would require a unique type of instruction as compared to communicating about general issues.

In considering why the expected pattern of results was found for the summarization activity and not the personal engagement activity, it is worth reevaluating what it means to see communication as being a relatively easy task. The initial rationale for using this particular dependant variable was that participants who went through an education program would learn about communication skills, learn about how those skills are useful for relationship communication (either general or sexual), and thus would see communication as easier than when they began the module. Additionally, it was anticipated that going through the personal engagement activity would emphasize for the participant the ways that they specifically could use the communication skills in the various situations. The hypotheses that the personal engagement activity would result in participants thinking it was easy to talk about general relationship topics, and that it would enhance the relationship between the sexual communication examples was based on constructivism (Bellefeuille et al., 2005; Fosnot, 1996), which states that individuals learn most effectively when they make personal connections to the material.

However, learning effectively does not necessarily mean having a more positive view of a topic, or in this case having the view that navigating communication skills would be easier. In reality, participants in the personal engagement conditions that focused on their experiences (or lack thereof) with communication (general or sexual) possibly became more aware of the challenges inherent in communication. The module itself includes information not only on how

to improve communication, but also the pitfalls, and the first activity participants go through is a self-reflection on times that they have used negative communication habits. It is well documented that the order information is presented in can have an impact on later perceptions, such that initial information carries increased evaluative weight (Hendrick & Costantini, 1970; and Jones, Riggs, & Quattrone, 1979); therefore, it may be that as participants continued to process the information in relation to themselves using a more negative frame. If this study is one of the only times that participants have thought deeply about their ability to communicate in relationships their personal reflections may emphasize the difficulty often present in these types of conversations. In this case, the patterns found would be consistent with constructivism, just not in the manner that was originally conceived. The participants' perceptions of general relationship communication were consistently influenced by the learning activity. In this case doing the summarization activities potentially allowed participants to think about general relationship communication in a more abstract and positive way than those in the personal engagement conditions. Additionally, the positive effect on the participants' ease communicating about sexual topics, facilitated by reading the sexual examples, may be working in opposition to the sobering effects of considering the challenge of communicating about sexual issues, thus lowering those participants to the same level as those that read the non-sexual examples. Again, reading the sexual examples and then simply summarizing them in the abstract may have better facilitated the short term perceptions about the ease of using these skills, by preventing the focus on the challenges.

Another possible interpretation of the results in the context of constructivism requires revisiting what it means to be personally engaged with material. Based on previous literature on constructivist pedagogy (Bellefeuil et al., 2005; Gould, 1996; Greene, 1996) a distinction was

made between classroom practices that actively encourage personal connection with the material as being representative of constructivist teaching methods and summarization, which was seen as representing a more passive style of learning. However, there can be also be distinctions made between techniques of constructivist pedagogy that encourage engagement versus the actual experience of engagement. While constructivist pedagogy may serve to encourage the type of personal connection and engagement with the material, students may become personally engaged with material without the implementation of such classroom practices through various avenues, including personal interest and motivation. Given this, it is possible that participants in both conditions felt engaged in different ways. Anecdotal evidence from speaking with participants after the experimental sessions suggests that participants across conditions found the material to be interesting and enjoyable to read. Thus, those in the personal engagement conditions may have been making connections and thinking about the material more deeply in terms of the challenges of communication, as suggested previously, while those in the summarization condition may have been deeply processing the information in terms of the wide variety of options and possibilities available for communication. However, even if in this study engagement happened even in the non-engagement condition, the results have provided support for the fact that for sexual communication the educational context and the pedagogical techniques used in the classroom are important to consider when designing an educational program.

This study has provided some insight into the impact of teaching communication skills in different educational contexts, using different pedagogical techniques. The next chapter will provide an overall summary of the findings and implications of the research, as well as discussions of methodological limitations and future directions.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

A main premise of this research was that there are ways to teach sexual communication that are distinct from the methods that can be used to teach general relationship communication. The pilot study was done to refine the materials to be used in the experimental study. The experimental study then investigated the effectiveness of the online communication module for teaching communication skills and facilitating sexual communication.

Overall, the results of these two studies provide evidence to support that going through a communication module does facilitate an increase in knowledge about sexual communication skills, and if this were the only goal of communication skills training, then skills could be taught inside or outside of a sexual education course. However, when it comes to seeing the skills as easy to implement when talking to a partner, there is something about sexual communication that distinguished it from general relationship communication. Learning about communication skills using sexual examples, combined with an opportunity to summarize the information through a writing activity, resulted in individuals who felt more at ease with the idea of using communication skills to talk about sexual issues with a partner than those who read sexual examples and did a personal engagement activity or individuals who learned about the skills using the nonsexual examples. Given these results, one overall conclusion that can be made is that if students are going to get one type of instruction about communicating with a relationship partner, they may be better off getting that information in the context of a sexuality education course. Additionally, the difference in the perceptions of those who went through the summarization and personal engagement activities indicates unique impacts of these two activities on sexual communication. Participants who go through courses with personal

engagement activities, as encouraged by constructivist learning theory, may end up with an awareness that sexual communication is distinct from general communication and that it is something that they would find challenging to do. Thus, if one's goal is to simply facilitate a mindset that using the skills will be easy, in order to encourage people to try using them, then a teaching these skills in a sexual education course that included summarization activities is likely to be the most broadly impactful. Participants who read the communication module with the sexual example seemed to be able to generalize what they learned to the general communication situations, but the reverse was not the case. However, implementing a curriculum with a personal engagement component still may be valuable. Additionally, there may be different types of benefits and impacts depending on the type of engagement a person engages in, whether that is a personally motivated engagement or that encouraged by an educational context. These types of activities may also increase other variables surrounding communication, such as seeing the skills as personally relevant to their experiences and may be beneficial for long-term knowledge retention.

Methodological Limitations

One of the main limitations of the study is the small sample size, with the smallest group having 11 participants, which may have made finding interactive effects more difficult. The pretest-posttest design of the study, along with the length of the lab study may have served to deter some participants from agreeing to commit the required time. This may be why separate analyses of the two subscales revealed unique patterns of results that were difficult to detect with the full model. It would be beneficial for the integrity of the study to recruit additional participants.

The other main limitation of the study is also one of its strengths. It is often difficult in educational research to do fully experimental designs, as the restrictions of preexisting classrooms and other such structural restrictions make random assignment difficult if not impossible. Thus, while a strength of the study is the experimental design and the control gained by presenting the communication module in a laboratory setting, this design is low in mundane realism. It is unlikely that this type of communication skills information and these writing activities would be presented outside of the context some sort of sexuality education course, and the module has from the beginning been conceptualized as something that could be used by instructors as part of a full sexuality education curriculum. It is likely that learning this information in the context of a course will only serve to emphasize and enhance the effects that have been found in the experimental study.

Finally, one of the challenges of work in the area of constructivism is that the concept of engagement is one that is difficult to manipulate or measure. As discussed previously, it is possible that participants in both the personal engagement and the summarization conditions participants engaged with the material, just in different ways, resulting in different responses on the dependant measures. In order to truly parse out the impact of engagement on perceptions of communication, future research should include assessments of the participants' perception of their interest in the material presented and explicit measures of the extent to which they feel that they connected to the material presented. This may also help to determine if there are differential impacts of engagement that comes from personal interest and engagement that is a result of educational contexts.

Future Directions

While the presence of significant patterns of results partially supports the hypotheses, it is worth noting that the effect sizes associated with these results are rather small, and so it is important to consider whether the observed differences are meaningful differences. This was a short module, with a single exposure to the material, and an assessment measure immediately following the consumption of the information. Given this, it is not surprising that the differences for the groups were small. However, it may be that while the impacts on the perceptual measures used in this study that asked people to anticipate their ease using the skills in various situations are small, there are more measurable or meaningful impacts of the module in regards to behavioral changes and actual use of the skills and the impact of the manipulation after a passage of time. Future research should add both a longitudinal component to assess knowledge retention and perceptual and attitudinal effects over time, and a behavioral measure, such as a diary study where people track over time their use of the skills in the different contexts of their relationships. Ultimately, the purpose of this line of research is to have people use the skills in sexual situations. It is possible that the impact of the module will be most apparent when an individual who has read the sexual examples and gone through the activities that helped them decide which skills were most useful for them are actually more able to talk to a partner about sexual issues in their relationship(s).

Another direction for this line of research is to explore how the module and examples could be altered for use in various educational contexts. In the future, additional sets of examples should be designed, so that educators can select the examples appropriate to their curriculum. Other sets of examples might be relevant to such programs as those that focus on sexual abstinence or programs targeted towards married or long-term couples trying to newly approach

their relationships after many years of commitment. As discussed in the introduction, one overall goal of this study is to minimize the focus on what value system is best, but instead to find ways to improve sex education, irrespective of the values being taught in each course. The examples used in this study would likely be appropriate for a more comprehensive sex education program. Programs that focus on abstinence might use examples that center on using good communication skills to have a conversation about what the sexual boundaries are in a relationship and the reasons for wanting to maintain those boundaries. The impact of this type of educational module using these examples and values should be established.

Further research in this area should also continue to assess the extent to which communication skills are used to discuss the topics covered specifically in the curriculum and those not explicitly mentioned. This study supported the idea that generalizing from learning communication skills in a general context to using them in a sexual context may not result in the same level of sexual communication as when the skills are learned in an explicitly context. It is possible that the differences found for general communication and sexual communication represent the only distinction, and that students who learn sexual communication skills about setting boundaries could generalize across different types of sexual situations to discussing things like sexual needs or desires. However, it may also be that different types of sexual communication are unique from each other, and that teaching someone to talk about boundaries may not generalize to talking about sexual needs within a relationship. This information will provide additional information for parents, educators, administrators, and students to use when deciding what type of sexuality education will be right for a specific situation.

It will also be useful to develop a base module and example sets targeted towards younger readers. The current module was written with college level sex education courses in

mind, and thus the reading level and the nature of the examples would likely be useful for college-age individuals, adults, and possibly older high school students. However, the information and skills presented in the module are skills that individuals can use to navigate communication situations starting at a very young age. Development of base modules at reading levels and examples appropriate for elementary and middle school age children will allow for these skills to be presented and practiced by students early. There is much evidence that adolescents are making sexual decisions earlier and earlier, and that some are making decisions that they later regret. By giving them the skills to communicate about the sexual topics and issues that are relevant to their age and life situations, we may be able to better equip children to grow into confident adolescents, and adolescents into confident adults, all whom are able to intelligently and safely navigate romantic and sexual relationships. Attention to these two elements is essential, as it has been established that the most effective sex education courses are the ones that are age appropriate and culturally relevant. By learning communication skills, individuals of all ages may be empowered to have happier, healthier, more satisfying romantic and sexual relationships.

CHAPTER VIII

SUMMARY

For the most part, sex education programs have sought to reduce the negative consequences of sexual behavior, such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). However, sex education programs also have the potential to encourage sexual behaviors that enhance relationships, such as communication with sexual partners. Higher levels of positive communication are related to higher relationship satisfaction and better decisions in regards to safe sex. However, communicating about sex can be uniquely challenging so specific instruction and practice may be necessary for this particular topic. One goal of this study was to experimentally examine the impact of teaching communication skills within the context of a sex education class, as compared to teaching them in a non-sexual context. Participants read an online educational module providing information about a variety of communication skills, using one of two sets of examples. It was expected that participants who read sexual examples would report that using communication skills to talk about sexual topics would be easier for them than those who read the non-sexual examples. Another goal of the study was to investigate the use of the constructivism as a framework for teaching sex education classes, which holds that those learning contexts that result in personal engagement and connections with material are more effective than those that do not. Participants went through a series of writing exercises as they read the module, requiring them to either reflect on how the information could be useful in their own lives or simply summarize what they read. It was expected that participants who did the writing activity that requires personal engagement with the material will remember the material better, and will anticipate more ease using the skills presented than those who are asked to simply summarize the material they read. Additionally, it was expected that the participants in

the personal engagement who also read the sexual examples would be especially at ease with using the skills to discuss sexual topics. Analyses of covariance were used to assess differences in knowledge and the ease of using the skills to talk about either general or sexual relationship topics, using participants pretest scores as covariates. Results indicated that going through the module did increase knowledge for all participants in all conditions, and that there was no difference in the learning that occurred as a result of the type of learning activity. For the ease of use across the two types of communication, sexual and general differing patterns of results were found. For the general topics, participants in the summarization condition thought using the skills would be easier than the participants in the personal engagement condition, regardless of example type. For the sexual topics, participants in the summarization condition who also read the sexual examples thought that communicating would be easier than did participants in any of the other three groups, whose ratings did not differ from each other. These results partially supported the hypotheses, contrary to expectations, the summarization activity facilitated greater ease instead of the personal engagement conditions; however, these results can still be understood in the context of constructivism. Instead of the personal engagement activity causing participants to see using the communication skills as easy, the connection and deeper processing of the material through the personal reflection may have caused participants to more clearly recognize the challenge inherent in relationship communication of all kinds. Future studies should expand this research to include both longitudinal and behavioral measures.

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Appendix A

Communication Examples for Pilot Testing

Thinking about Relationships
(Non-Sexual Relationship Issue – Male Actor)

Please read the scenario carefully and answer the questions that follow.

Michelle and Michael are generally happy in their relationship, but there is something that has been bothering Michael. Because of their busy schedules – both work part-time jobs while trying to complete their undergraduate degrees - they only get to see each other once or twice a week. But Michael would really like for them to find a way to get together more frequently. He has been trying to hint to Michelle about this desire by always mentioning when he has free time, but she doesn't seem to be picking up on it. He has not said anything directly because he is afraid that Michelle will react negatively to his suggestion. He does not want her to think that he is demanding and critical, or that he is being needy. So instead of saying something, he keeps hoping that they will start spending more time together, and continues to feel dissatisfied with this part of their relationship.

How much do you like Michael?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

Given the situation, how reasonable is Michael's desire to change the way his relationship with Michelle is going?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

Given the situation, how reasonable is Michael's suggestion for changing the relationship?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

How common do you think Michael's situation is?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

How much can you identify with Michael's point of view in this situation?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

What additional comments, if any, do you have about Michael?

Thinking about Relationships
(Sexual Relationship Issue– Male Actor)

Please read the scenario carefully and answer the questions that follow.

Michelle and Michael are generally happy in their relationship, but there is something that has been bothering Michael. He feels like their sex life is becoming predictable, and he would like to spice things up. For the past several weeks they have been doing the exact same thing every time they have sex. He went out and bought a book that has lots of different sexual positions, and he would like to suggest to Michelle that they try some of them. He has tried to hint to her that he wants to try new things by nudging her and trying to move into different positions during sex, but she does not seem to be picking up on it. He has not said anything directly, because he is afraid that Michelle will react negatively to his suggestion. He does not want her to think that he is demanding and critical, or that he is being needy. So instead of saying anything, he leaves the book in the back of the closet, and continues to feel dissatisfied with this part of their relationship.

How much do you like Michael?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

Given the situation, how reasonable is Michael's desire to change the way his relationship with Michelle is going?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

Given the situation, how reasonable is Michael's suggestion for changing the relationship?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

How common do you think Michael's situation is?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

How much can you identify with Michael's point of view in this situation?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

What additional comments, if any, do you have about Michael?

Thinking about Relationships
(Non-Sexual Relationship Issue– Female Actor)

Please read the scenario carefully and answer the questions that follow.

Michael and Michelle are generally happy in their relationship, but there is something that has been bothering Michelle. Because of their busy schedules – both work part-time jobs while trying to complete their undergraduate degrees - they only get to see each other once or twice a week. But Michelle would really like for them to find a way to get together more frequently. She has been trying to hint to Michael about this desire by always mentioning when she has free time, but he doesn't seem to be picking up on it. She has not said anything directly because she is afraid that Michael will react negatively to her suggestion. She does not want him to think that she is demanding and critical, or that she is being needy. So instead of saying something, she keeps hoping that they will start spending more time together, and continues to feel dissatisfied with this part of their relationship.

How much do you like Michelle?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

Given the situation, how reasonable is Michelle's desire to change the way her relationship with Michael is going?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

Given the situation, how reasonable is Michelle's suggestion for changing the relationship?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

How common do you think Michelle's situation is?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

How much can you identify with Michelle's point of view in this situation?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

What additional comments, if any, do you have about Michelle?

Thinking about Relationships
(Sexual Relationship Issue– Female Actor)

Please read the scenario carefully and answer the questions that follow.

Michael and Michelle are generally happy in their relationship, but there is something that has been bothering Michelle. She feels like their sex life is becoming predictable, and she would like to spice things up. For the past several weeks they have been doing the exact same thing every time they have sex. She went out and bought a book that has lots of different sexual positions, and she would like to suggest to Michael that they try some of them. She has tried to hint to him that he wants to try new things by nudging him and trying to move into different positions during sex, but he does not seem to be picking up on it. She has not said anything directly, because she is afraid that Michael will react negatively to her suggestion. She does not want him to think that she is demanding and critical, or that she is being needy. So instead of saying anything, she leaves the book in the back of the closet, and continues to feel dissatisfied with this part of their relationship.

How much do you like Michelle?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

Given the situation, how reasonable is Michelle's desire to change the way her relationship with Michael is going?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

Given the situation, how reasonable is Michelle's suggestion for changing the relationship?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

How common do you think Michelle's situation is?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

How much can you identify with Michelle's point of view in this situation?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very much so

What additional comments, if any, do you have about Michelle?

Appendix B

Communication Skills Educational Module

Communication in Romantic Relationships

Introduction

The success of a new romantic relationship largely depends on how well the individuals involved can talk to each other.

Good Communication is important because:

- Healthy communication can result in greater relationship satisfaction and longer lasting relationships. Partners who use good communication are better able to work through misunderstandings and disagreements, and have a greater chance of success in the long run.
- Good communication allows partners to better understand each other's needs and desires.
- Understanding each other and sharing information allows a relationship to move from one stage to the next and grow deeper over time.

Sometimes using good communication skills is easy, but romantic relationships can pose challenges. Emotional feelings typically run much stronger in romantic relationships than in other types of relationships, so it is often difficult to actually use good communication skills when they count the most. This may also be because:

- The thought of creating conflicts in a relationship by bringing up conflicts and sensitive issues to someone you care about can be very scary.
- Communicating one's needs, desires, and fears can make someone feel vulnerable. Each time one person in a romantic relationship brings up a need or a problem, they risk being hurt, misunderstood, or rejected by their partner.
- Sometimes both partners are not equally open about communicating.

In order to minimize these risks, it is a good idea to learn effective communication techniques. The goal of this module is to give you information and examples of some communication skills that have been found to be effective, so that you can take that information and use it in your own relationships. There are many types of communication that can be used in relationships, including verbal communication (using words and language) and nonverbal communication (using actions, touches, eye contact, vocal tone, etc.). Nonverbal communication is common and can be useful in relationships, but this module will focus on verbal communication.

For some of you, this may be the first time you are getting this information. For some of you the information presented may be familiar, especially if you have already had some education about

communication skills. This module is designed to provide information for a variety of people, including those who have never received any education about communication skills. If you are already familiar with some of the information, that is great. The more information you have on a topic the better you can use that information in your own life. Hopefully, there may be some new information that can help you, even about the topics you already are familiar with. Either way, this module will allow you to strengthen and broaden your knowledge about communication skills.

Consider the following situation:^{1,2}

Non-sexual Issue Condition: Michael and Michelle are generally happy in their relationship; but there is something that has been bothering Michelle. Because of their busy schedules – they both work part-time jobs while trying to finish their undergraduate degrees - they only get to see each other once or twice a week. But Michelle would really like for them to find a way to get together more frequently. She has been trying to hint to Michael about this desire by always mentioning when she has free time, but he doesn't seem to be picking up on it. She doesn't want to make him think that she is needy or that she doesn't trust him, or that she is pushy. So instead of saying something, she keeps hoping that they will start spending more time together, and continues to feel dissatisfied with this part of their relationship.

Sexual Needs Condition: Michael and Michelle are generally happy in their relationship; but there is something that has been bothering Michelle. She feels like their sex life is becoming predictable, and she would like to spice things up. For the past several weeks they have been doing the exact same thing every time they have sex. She went out and bought a book that has lots of different sexual positions, and she would like to suggest to Michael that they try some of them. She has tried to hint to him that she wants to try new things but nudging him and trying to move into different positions during sex, but he does not seem to be picking up on it. She has not said anything directly, because she is afraid that Michael will react negatively to her suggestion. She does not want him to think that she is demanding or critical, or that she is being pushy. So instead of saying anything, she leaves the book in the back of the closet, and continues to feel dissatisfied with this part of their relationship.

¹ Participants will only see one set of examples, either the non-sexual examples or the sexual examples.

² The specific examples used in the experimental study will be determined by the results of the pilot study. The examples included in the module are two possible sets of examples. All variations will be based on these, using specifics determined by the results of the pilot study.

This is a perfect example of a relationship situation where positive, healthy communication might resolve or prevent problems from further developing. What should Michelle do in this situation?

This example will be used throughout the module. However, it is also important to remember that this is only one situation, and that these skills can be used by people in all types of relationships, contexts, and communication challenges.

What NOT to do

To begin, it is important to understand what unhealthy communication practices look like. Many people are so used to using less than ideal communication skills that they have become normal. When communication is about sensitive and emotional topics and takes place within a romantic relationship, poor communication can easily result in hurt feelings and negative changes in the relationship. In order to have healthy relationships, it is good to be able to identify poor communication patterns so that they can be stopped and replaced with better techniques. The next few pages will talk about different types of things to avoid.

Don't wait to talk

One common communication mistake is to avoid talking to someone about a problem until it gets really bad. When people don't communicate about something, it is likely that the problem will build and one or both of the people in the relationship may begin to resent the other. The result of this building resentment might be a large fight, or even ending the relationship, all over something that could have easily resolved.

In the case of Michelle and Michael, there are several different things might happen. Sometimes one person is unhappy, and not communicating that to his or her partner causes problems. For example:

Non-sexual Issue Condition: Michelle lets her nervousness and discomfort take over and doesn't say anything to Michael about the fact that she wants them to spend more time together. Michael thinks that things have been going really well, is blissfully unaware that Michelle wants to change things, and has no reason to believe otherwise. He would not be against seeing each other more, but it has not occurred to him that anything needs to change. Michelle feels unsatisfied with this part of their relationship and begins to resent Michael.

Sexual Issue Condition: Michelle lets her nervousness and discomfort take over and doesn't say anything to Michael about the fact that she wants to spice up their sex life. Michael thinks that things have been going really well, is blissfully unaware that Michelle wants to change things, and has no reason to believe otherwise. He would not be against spicing things up, but it has not occurred to him that anything needs to change. Michelle feels unsatisfied with this part of their relationship and begins to resent Michael.

Another possibility is that both people feel unhappy about the same thing without realizing it. In this case, the issue is something that both people want to talk about, but neither knows that the other also wants to change things. An example of this might be something like this:

Non-sexual Issue Condition: Michael and Michelle having been very busy and are both unhappy that they have not been able to spend very much time together. However, neither says anything to the other because they are both afraid that the other will think they are too needy. In this situation, Michael and Michelle are both worried about the same thing, but they don't talk about it so both continue to feel unsatisfied. Each starts to resent the other.

Sexual Issue Condition: Michael and Michelle both kind of feel like their sex life is in a rut and each has been thinking about ways to spice things up. However, neither says anything to the other because they are both afraid that the other will not be open to the suggestion. In this situation, Michael and Michelle are both worried about the same thing, but they don't talk about it so both continue to feel unsatisfied. Each starts to resent the other.

In each situation the issue could be resolved, if were to communicate with each other. But because they didn't communicate, negative feelings built up.

Negative Communication Habits

There are also situations where people try to communicate, but they use unhealthy communication patterns that do more harm than good.

Some unhealthy communication patterns include:

- Only expressing criticism or focusing on problems
- Bringing up every little problem and constantly picking fights about minor issues
- Being defensive and seeing every comment or attempt to talk as an attack
- Stonewalling, which includes refusing to respond to the other person, and not showing emotion
- Using aggressive or closed body language, such as yelling or walking away from someone when they are speaking

To give an example, Michelle might eventually get frustrated and extremely dissatisfied with the relationship, so she finally decides to say something to Michael. A poor way to bring up her concerns might be something like this...

Non-sexual Issue Condition: *We have been seeing each other for awhile now, and we are just not spending the amount of time together that we should be. You are always busy and never have time for me. I have not been enjoying myself and have been trying to get you to make more plans, but you just don't seem to be getting it. I am really not happy with the way our relationship has been going.*

Sexual Issue Condition: *We have been seeing each other for awhile now, and our physical relationship is just not what it should be. We always do the exact same thing and it is really boring and monotonous. I have not been enjoying myself and have been trying to get you to try some new things, but you just don't seem to be getting it. I am really not happy with the way our relationship has been going.*

Michelle's entire statement focuses only on negative comments and criticisms of Michael. The impact of her negative words is likely to be made even stronger if she is yelling or glaring at him as she says it. In response to this type of negative communication, it would not be surprising to hear Michael say something like...

Non-sexual Issue Condition: *Why are you always blaming me for everything that is wrong in your life? I have a life, and I can't be with you 24 hours a day. I am sick of you making everything my fault!*

Sexual Issue Condition: *Why are you always blaming me for everything that is wrong in our relationship? How am I supposed to know you want to do other stuff? You certainly seem into what we have been doing. I am sick of you making everything my fault!*

Here, Michael is responding in a very defensive way. He might even decide to walk away and refuse to engage in a conversation that is mainly about what he does wrong in the relationship. In this situation, it is likely that the things they are saying to each other will result in hurt feelings, and that this type of talking will not result in any kind of solution. The next sections will talk about better ways to communicate with a partner.

Reflection activity³

Personal Engagement Condition: *Think about the information you just read, and reflect on your own romantic and/or sexual⁴ relationship(s). If you have never been in a romantic and/or sexual relationship, think about how these skills might be of use when communicating with a good friend. (Note that a sexual relationship can be any relationship that involves a sexual component including, but is not limited to, sexual behaviors such as kissing, fondling, oral sex, sexual intercourse, etc., with any short term or long term partners.)*

³ Participants will only see one set of reflection activities, either the personal engagement or the summarization activities.

⁴ Information that is underlined will only be viewed by those in the sexual example conditions. Those in the non-sexual example conditions will view the text without the underlined portions included.

Do any of the negative communication habits sound like something that you have fallen victim to in the past? (Most people have done at least one of these and some people have done many, so don't feel bad!) If so, which ones? What was the impact of these types of communication on your relationship(s)? Feel free to provide specific examples from your own experience. Write out your response in the space provided.

Summarization Condition: Think about the information that you just read, and provide a summary. What were the main points or ideas presented to you? Write out your response in the space provided.

What TO do

Now that you have an idea of the types of communication that are not as good, the rest of the information will be about different types of good communication skills that can be used instead. First, there are two sides to consider when communicating with someone else. Both the speaker and the listener play a role in making sure that communication is effective. Someone has to say something for a conversation to begin, but the other person also has to be willing to listen or the speaker might as well be talking to the wall.

How to Talk

When starting a conversation in a relationship there are several things to keep in mind. The five speaking skills are:

- Make Space to Communicate
- Match the Intent and Impact
- Be Clear and Direct
- Soften Complaints

These skills can help you to tell a partner what you are feeling, and maximize the chance that they are open to hearing what you have to say, especially when you are bringing up a complaint or addressing something in the relationship you think needs improvement. Developing these communication skills make it more likely that the intent and impact of a message will be the same, and that the conversation is a more positive experience for both people.

Make Space to Communicate

A very important element of effective communication, and one of the first things to tackle, is to create a situation that allows both partners to be engaged and invested in the conversation. It is good to use the communication skills that have been discussed so far, but if the conversation is not started at the right time, the chance of effective communication is limited. Some things to keep in mind are to:

- Choose a private space. Talking about problems in front of others will limit honesty and put the other person on the spot.

- Avoid bringing up a concern or problem when either person is are tired, stressed, or distracted.
- Make sure that there is enough time to fully address the issue. Starting a conversation at the end of an evening can result in people feeling rushed or not invested in the resolution of the issue.
- Always talk in person if at all possible. Especially when bringing up a problem or concern, avoid the use of electronic communication such as email and texting. Communication is affected by both the words we choose and the vocal tone, facial expression, and body language we use. Even talking on the phone limits the ability to see these things.

Many people do not choose the right time to begin important conversations with their partners, because often people will bring up concerns when the issues are foremost in their minds. However, paying attention to such things can help make the conversation easier.

Matching the Impact and Intent

Differences can occur in the way each person interprets the information. It is important to make sure that what the speaker says and the listener hears are the same thing. This means making the intent and the impact of the message match. The **intent** is what the speaker *actually* means when they say something. The **impact** is what the listener *thinks* that the speaker means

Sometimes the intent of the message can be misunderstood, which can change the impact. This is especially likely if people use broad or vague statements. For example, in an attempt to make some changes in their relationship Michelle might begin a conversation with Michael by saying:

Non-sexual Issue Condition: *I am not really happy about the amount of time we spend together.*

Sexual Issue Condition: *I am not really happy about what we have been doing in bed.*

The **intent** of the message:

Non-sexual Issue Condition: *Michelle wants Michael to know that she is not satisfied with the amount of time they spend together. She enjoys the time they do spend together and wants to work together to add more to that.*

Sexual Issue Condition: *Michelle wants to let Michael to know that she is not satisfied with their physical relationship. She enjoys what they have been doing and wants to work together more to that.*

A possible **impact**:

Non-sexual Issue Condition: *Michael gets mad. He had no clue that Michelle wasn't happy with the amount of time they spent together, and thinks she is blaming him for her dissatisfaction.*

Sexual Issue Condition: *Michael gets mad. He had no clue that Michelle wasn't happy with what they were doing, and thinks she is blaming him for her dissatisfaction.*

In this example, the impact was not what Michelle intended. Because we are all different and can't read each others' minds, it is possible for people to misunderstand each others. Here the simple statement left a lot of room for interpretation, and resulted in Michael having a negative response to Michelle's attempt to talk to him. Good communicators seek to make sure that the intent and impact of their message are the same, and there are many ways to increase the likelihood of this happening.

Be Clear and Direct

As demonstrated in the previous section, a partner is not a mind reader, so it is important to be clear and direct when making statements. The more specific a statement is, the more likely it is to be understood by the other person, whether the speaker is making a request or bringing up a concern.

So, instead of simply saying that she is unsatisfied, Michelle begins the conversation with Michael she might want to say,

Non-sexual Issue Condition: *Michael, I wanted to talk to you about something. I am not really happy about with the amount of time we have been spending together recently, and I would like to work together to find some more times that we can see each other. I wanted to see if you are interested. I have some ideas about some ways we can do that, and I was hoping that we could try some of them out.*

Sexual Issue Condition: *Michael, I wanted to talk to you about something. I am not really happy about with what we have been doing in bed recently. I feel like I am ready to try some other things. I wanted to know if you are interested. I have some ideas about some different positions, and I was hoping that we could try some of them out.*

Michelle has specifically mentioned what element of their relationship she would like to talk about and she has been clear about her feelings about the situation.

In addition, with this statement Michelle has mentioned that she likes what they have been doing, and that making changes is something she wants them to do together. This may keep Michael

from feeling like he is being blamed for Michelle's dissatisfaction, and will probably make him more open to continuing the conversation.

Soften Complaints

There are no relationships that don't have problems. However, there are ways to bring up problems that can make discussion of those issues easier. Especially when talking about problems, people can feel attacked and defensive when their partner starts a conversation. So, another thing that is a good idea is to limit complaints to one per conversation. In the following statement, Michelle lets her frustration get out of control and lets go with a barrage of complaints.

Non-sexual Issue Condition: Michael, I need to tell you something. Our relationship is completely neglected. Michael, how come you can't make time to see me more? You seem completely unaware of the fact that I want to see you more than once a week. And why can't we go to my place for a change? You always insist that I come over to your house instead of you coming to mine. Oh, and that thing you do where you forget to call me back when I call you. Never do that again.

Sexual Issue Condition: Michael, I need to tell you something. Our sex life is completely boring. How come you are so sexually repressed? You seem completely unaware that I want to try other things besides what we have been doing. You always take the lead in our sex life. You always decide what we do. Things really need to change if this relationship is going to work. We have got spice things up. Oh, and that thing you do when you are sucking on my ear. It's awful. Never do it again.

Michelle may very well be unhappy with each and every one of those things, but hearing all that at once, Michael may feel overwhelmed. By limiting the discussion to one issue, the conversation can remain focused on a single problem that can be more easily addressed, and it will be less like that Michael will feel attacked or like he can't do anything right.

In addition, when you do need to bring up something that is a problem, it is always a good idea to bring up positive elements situation. This means saying something positive or giving a compliment to the person, along with the complaint. Unsurprisingly, when someone gets a compliment or is approached in a positive way, it is far more likely that they will be open to communicating with the other person.

For example, Michelle might say:

Non-sexual Issue Condition: I love the way I feel when we are together. You have the ability to make me laugh and we have such a good time whenever we do anything. But there is one thing that I wanted to talk to you about. I have been feeling like we haven't been spending very much time together and that you are always busy when I try to make plans. I am wondering if we could work together to make more time for each other.

Sexual Issue Condition: I love the way I feel when we are together. You have the ability to make me feel incredible in bed. But there is one thing that I wanted to talk to you

about. I have been feeling like we have gotten into a rut and I am wondering if we could spice things up a bit by trying out some new positions.

By beginning in this way, Michelle has made it clear to Michael that there are things in the relationship that are positive, but that there is also one specific thing that she would like to change.

One last thing to notice about how Michelle is phrasing her comments in the second example is that she is using “I statements.” By being clear that her request or concern is based on her own feelings, she is speaking for herself and not making assumptions about what Michael thinks or feels. While your partner is not a mind reader, neither are you. Using statements such as “I feel” or “I think” is also less likely to put the other person on the defensive, because it is less likely to seem like you are placing blame on your partner.

Reflection Activity

Personal Engagement Condition: Think about the information presented in the section that you just read, and reflect on your own romantic and/or sexual relationship(s). Which of the skills most stand out to you as something that could be useful in your own relationship(s)? Why do you think those particular skills stand out to you the most? How might using these skills have positive impacts on your relationship(s)? Feel free to provide specific examples from your own experiences. Write out your response in the space provided.

Summary Condition: Think about the information that you just read, and provide a summary. What were the main points or ideas presented to you? Write out your response in the space provided.

How to Listen

Everything mentioned up to this point maximize chances that the person being spoken to will receive the message being sent and be willing to communicate about whatever issues are presented. However, while it is often assumed that the most important part of communication is conveying messages, an equally large part of good communication is receiving messages that come from the other person.

Both people are responsible for making sure that the intent and the impact of the message correspond with each other. But, the person receiving the message has a responsibility to make sure that what they are hearing is the same as what is being said.

If you think back, one of the reasons Michelle had not said anything to Michael was that she was afraid that he would respond negatively to her attempts to talk about their relationship. By being a good listener, the speaker may be able to put some of those fears to rest, thereby making for a more comfortable discussion.

Be an Active Listener

With this in mind, the first step to is to be an active listener. An active listener makes it clear to the person delivering the message that he or she is paying attention and is interested in what the person is saying. This can be achieved by using good nonverbal skills, which include:

- Sitting down with the person, and staying where they can easily talk to you
- Making eye contact
- Using appropriate facial expressions, such as smiling at good things and looking concerned when the person is talking about problems
- Facing the person using an open body posture, and avoiding positions such as crossing the arms in front of the chest.

By sitting down and being attentive, a situation is created that tells the other person that you understand that what they are saying is important, and that you want to hear their thoughts.

It can be very difficult to express a concern or make a request to someone who is wandering around the room and looking at everything except the person speaking, and this is increased when talking about a sensitive subject like relationships.

Make sure you understand

An additional element of good listening is related to making sure the intent and impact of a message match. After the speaker has completed his or her initial thoughts, he or she should allow the listener to respond. If the other person's statements are unclear, misunderstandings can be minimized by simply asking for clarification. One way to insure what the other person said was correctly understood is to paraphrase the other person's points, and to ask questions when necessary. For example, in response to Michelle's request to make some changes, Michael might say:

Non-sexual Issue Condition: I am glad that you let me know that there is something bothering you. What I am hearing from you is that you like the time we spend together, but that you want to try to schedule some more time to see each other. Is there any specific time that you had in mind?

Sexual Issue Condition: I am glad that you let me know that there is something bothering you. What I am hearing from you is that you like some of what we have been doing in bed, but that you want to try some new things to try to make things more interesting. Is there anything else you might want to try in addition to that?

By paraphrasing Michael has expressed to Michelle how he understands her request, and then given her a chance to correct any misunderstandings. He has also has expressed a positive response to her effort to communicate and showed that he knows that she is upset. He has not said that he agreed with her, or that he feels the same way, but he has made it clear that he understands that the issue is one that they should discuss further.

Reflection Activity

Personal Engagement Condition: Again, think about the information presented in the section that you just read, and reflect on your own romantic and/or sexual relationship(s). Which of the skills most stand out to you as something that could be useful in your own relationship(s)? Why do you think those particular skills stand out to you the most? How might using these skills have positive impacts on your relationship(s)? Feel free to provide specific examples from your own experiences. Write out your response in the space provided.

Summary Condition: Think about the information that you just read, and provide a summary. What were the main points or ideas presented to you? Write out your response in the space provided.

The give and take of communication

So far communication skills related to expressing ideas and concerns to a partner and to listening and responding to someone's initial communication have been presented separately. However, it is important to remember that communication involves give and take, often because the point of communicating about something is to address an issue or solve problem.

Along these lines, it is important to make sure to:

- Remember that both people will need to talk at some point. Let people take turns being the speaker and the listener in the same discussion.
- Keep the conversation from getting bogged down in problems. Avoid discussing every single offense and every single issue all at the same time.
- Express appreciation that the other person opened the lines of communication, which can be done whether people agree with the other person or not.
- Remember that people do not have to agree about everything. Sometimes both people will see a problem, and sometime only one person will. However, it is important to communicate in both situations.
- Instead of dwelling too much on what has already happened make sure that the conversation includes a discussion about how to address the issue. This might mean coming up with solutions, establishing changes to be made, or agreeing to disagree.

- If needed, share information and then pick up the conversation again at a later time after each person has had time to think about things. Not everything can be addressed with one conversation. For significant issues, make an agreement to talk again at a set time in the future, to see if things are getting better.

Communication: Talking About the Bad and the Good

Hopefully, the previous information has provided some things to think about and some skills to try when communicating about a romantic relationship. However, one other thing to keep in mind is that people often communicate with their partner only when there is a problem or conflict in their relationship. But keep in mind that people with the most successful relationships on average make 20 positive comments to each other for every 1 negative one and couples on the verge of divorce report 5 negative interactions for every 1 positive interaction.

The example of Michael and Michelle largely has to do with communicating about a problem or concern. However, it is just as important to communicate about the things in your relationship that you are happy with. Michelle would be well served at some point to remind Michael why she chooses to be with him.

Non-sexual Issue Condition: Michael, I just wanted to tell you how much I like spending time with you. We never really go anywhere fancy, and we don't need to. The times we spend talking and goofing are some of the best parts of my week.

Sexual Issue Condition: Michael, I just want you to know how good you make me feel when you are together. That thing you do when you slowly run your hands from my shoulders all the way to my toes feels amazing. It just makes me melt.

So as you go out and apply the information and skills you have read about today, remember to communicate about the things that are good in your relationship. They do not have to be big things; they just have to be good things.

Reflection Activity

Personal Engagement Condition: One last time, think about the information presented in the section that you just read, and reflect on your own romantic and/or sexual relationship(s). Which of the skills most stand out to you as something that could be useful in your own relationship(s)? Why do you think those particular skills stand out to you the most? How might using these skills have positive impacts on your relationship(s)? Feel free to provide specific examples from your own experiences. Write out your response in the space provided.

Summary Condition: Think about the information that you just read, and provide a summary. What were the main points or ideas presented to you? Write out your response in the space provided.

Final Thoughts...

You have read about a lot of different suggestions for ways to make communication in relationships better, and you were given a specific example to help you see how these skills might be used. Michael and Michelle are just one couple, having one conversation. Remember that that these guidelines are appropriate for any type of communication that might take place in a romantic relationship, whether it is just starting out or is a long term commitment.

Also, remember that no one is going to be perfect, and sometimes conversations will not go as well as you might hope. People will yell, lose their tempers, and avoid talking about problems. However, not using good communication skills at one point in a relationship is no reason to believe that communication patterns cannot change. No matter what, big conversations and small offhand comments will be more effective and create a stronger relationship if these healthy communication skills are used.

Appendix C

Knowledge Assessment Items for Pilot Testing

Relationship Communication

Please read the questions below and answer them to the best of your ability. Some of the terms may not be familiar to you. If you encounter a term that you do not know, do your best to answer the question anyway. We are pilot or pre-testing these questions in order to determine which can be answered without specific instruction on the topic of relationship communication. These results are very important for a future study, so please do the best you can. Thank you for your assistance.

(Note: The starred answer is the correct answer)

- 1) Which of the following is NOT a good way to send a message or talk to your partner about your relationship?
 - A. Being Direct
 - B. Using "I" Statements
 - C. Combining topics of Discussion*
 - D. Making space for communication

- 2) Nancy tells her partner that he "never listens." Nancy is not using ideal communication skills because she is
 - A. Placing the blame only on her partner
 - B. Not being clear about the problem
 - C. Both A and B*
 - D. Neither A and B

- 3) Kumar and Denise have been bickering a lot, and their fights always escalate into yelling and slamming doors. Denise knows she has not been doing a good job of listening to Kumar's point of view. Which of the following represents an active listening skill that Denise might want to try?
 - A. Avoiding direct eye contact, so not to seem like she is challenging him
 - B. Following Kumar when he paces the room so that she can show she is paying attention
 - C. Nodding in response to Kumar's comments and using appropriate facial expressions*
 - D. Keeping her arms in close to her body so that she is not fidgeting and doesn't look bored

- 4) Reggie's partner Rayanne tells him that she doesn't like it when he goes out with his friends without telling her beforehand. Reggie doesn't think he should have to tell Rayanne everything he does, and is irritated that she thinks he should. When Rayanne brings up the issue in conversation, Reggie tells her he is glad that she told him about what bothers her, even though he doesn't agree with what she is saying. Reggie is
 - A. paraphrasing.

- B. using active listening skills.
- C. validating her attempts to communicate*
- D. speaking in a way that his impact does not match is intent

5) In ideal communication situations

- A. there is a primary speaker and a primary listener.
- B. the roles of speaker and listener may change between people as each person offers their point of view.*
- C. the roles of speaker and listener are purposefully maintained, based on who started the conversation.
- D. None of the above are true

6) Research indicates that on average people who are generally satisfied with their relationships display

- A. an equal amount of negative and positive interactions
- B. all positive communication interactions and no negative interactions
- C. more positive communication interactions as compared to their negative interactions*
- D. more negative interactions as compared to their positive interactions

7) Whenever May tries to talk to Greg about their relationship, he gets quiet and refuses to have a conversation with her. Sometimes, he even gets up and leaves the room. Greg is displaying

- A. healthy communication, because he is giving himself time to cool off before talking to her.
- B. unhealthy communication, because he is stonewalling.*
- C. healthy communication, because he is not letting May pick a fight.
- D. unhealthy communication, because he is being defensive.

8) As a speaker, limiting complaints to one per conversation is beneficial because

- A. it allows partners to focus on one problem at a time, instead of trying to fix everything.
- B. it prevents the listener from feeling overwhelmed by negative comments.
- C. it makes it less likely that the speaker will become overly emotional or out of control.
- D. All of the above*

9) Matching the impact of a message to the intent of the message means

- A. that the speaker makes sure that what he/she is thinking and what he/she is saying are the same.
- B. that what the speaker says and the listener hears are the same.*
- C. that what the listener hears and what the listener says when paraphrasing the conversation are the same.
- D. that what the speaker says and the listener says back are the same.

10) Jim wants to talk to Jo about their relationships. Which of the following would NOT be an example of the types of things Jim might do to create a good communication situation?

- A. Starting the conversation while they are busy with other things, such as making dinner, so that the conversation is less awkward.*
- B. Choosing a private space that is on neutral ground.
- C. Avoiding using available electronic communication options like email and text messaging.
- D. All of the above are good things to do.

11) Which of the following is NOT a benefit of good relationship communication?

- A. It allows partners to understand each others' needs within a relationship.
- B. It results in partners being more satisfied with relationships.
- C. It puts both partners on equal footing in a relationship. *
- D. It keeps people from needing to have arguments or fights.

12) Which of the following is given as a reason that people avoid communicating with a romantic partner?

- A. Communicating about themselves makes them feel vulnerable.
- B. They are afraid that their partner will not be open to what they are saying.
- C. Talking about relationship issues does not do enough good to be worth the time it takes.*
- D. They do not want to upset their partner.

13) When talking about negative situations or issues with a partner, it is a good idea to soften complaints. Which of the following is an example of that communication technique?

- A. Denise tells Frank she loves the fact he plans their dates, but that she would like to do more things they both enjoy, instead of mostly things that he specifically enjoys. *
- B. Pamela tells Chase she dislikes the fact that he never wants to go out with her friends. She decides to wait until another day to talk about how, when he does decide to come out with the group, he is often rude and short tempered with the other members of the group.
- C. Trevor decides to wait until they are doing something that she enjoys to tell Roxie that he doesn't like going to see her parents every weekend, so that she is happy and she won't be as easily upset.
- D. Instead of telling Jeremy that she hates his favorite band and doesn't want to listen to their music all the time, Amanda simply suggests a different band for them to listen to.

14) Which of the following is true about taking breaks within a conversation or discussion?

- A. People should not stop talking about an issue until it is completely resolved, so neither person will forget the points that have been raised during the conversation.
- B. Some topics or issues are too complicated to be resolved in one conversation, but partners should talk as long as possible to get as much resolved as they can.

- C. Never end a conversation angry. Negative feelings at the end of a discussion session will just create more negativity in the relationship and time passing will cause those to build.
- D. None of the above are true.*

15) Rick tells Kate that it hurts his feelings when she makes fun of him in front of their friends. He tells her that he knows she is kidding, but that it is still embarrassing because she tends to point out dumb things that he does. After he is finished telling Kate this, she says that, as she understands it, Rick is embarrassed when she teases him in front of their friends, and that it hurts his feelings. Why is Kate taking the time to repeat what Rick said?

- A. It allows Rick to identify if Kate misunderstands what he is trying to say, so he can correct her impression if needed. *
- B. It allows Kate to tell Rick what she think he said, so that she can begin to give him her point of view.
- C. It allows Rick to hear how he sounds to other people when he complains, so he can look at things from her point of view.
- D. It allows Kate to keep the conversation going, even if she hasn't yet decided what she wants to say in response to his comments.

Appendix D
Demographics

Demographics

1. What is your gender?

Male Female Other

If other, please specify. _____

2. What is your age? _____

3. Are you currently in a romantic relationship?

Yes No

4. If yes, how many months have you been in that relationship?

5. If no, have you ever been in a romantic relationship?

Yes No

6. Are you currently in a sexually active relationship? (For the purposes of this study, being sexually active involves participating in any sexual interactions, i.e. kissing, fondling, oral sex, sexual intercourse, etc., with any short term or long term partners)

Yes No

7. If no, has there ever been a point in your life that you have considered yourself to be sexually active, based on the definition above?

Yes No

8. Are you currently involved in a relationship that includes sexual intercourse specifically (this may be any relationship with a short term or long term partner that involves sexual intercourse)?

Yes No

9. If no, has there ever been a point in your life that you have been in a relationship that included sexual intercourse, based on the definition above?

Appendix E

Partner Communication Questionnaire

Partner Communication Questionnaire

This questionnaire will ask you a series of questions about how easy it would be for you to use the communication skills you know about to talk to a romantic partner about specific topics or situations that might come up in a relationship. Communication skills are any methods or techniques that can be used to communicate with another person. Some items refer to “sexual activities” activities. In this case, the term sexual activities can involve a wide variety of behaviors including but not limited to cuddling, flirting, kissing, touching, oral sex, intercourse, and/or abstaining from sexual contact. Please respond to the questions based on the sexual nature of your own relationship.

Answer the questions based on your most recent or current relationship. If you have never been in a romantic relationship, answer based on how you think you might act in the future. Select the point that best represents your answer.

1. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to say something about a habit your partner has that you do not like?

Very Difficult Very Easy

2. How easy would it be to use the verbal communication skills you know to tell your partner about something that he or she does within your relationship that makes you happy?

Very Difficult Very Easy

3. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to talk to a partner about a new type of sexual activity you would like the two of you to try doing together?

Very Difficult Very Easy

4. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills to tell you partner that you are not happy with the frequency of your sexual interactions?

Very Difficult Very Easy

5. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to have a conversation about relationship boundaries, such as what kinds of social things you are comfortable or not comfortable doing with him or her?

Very Difficult Very Easy

6. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to talk to a partner about a new fun activity you would like the two of you to try doing together?

Very Difficult Very Easy

7. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to talk to a partner about how you don't like one of his or her close friends?

Very Difficult Very Easy

8. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to talk to your partner when you sense there is something about your relationship that seems to be bothering him or her?

Very Difficult Very Easy

9. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to say something when your partner does something sexual that you do not like?

Very Difficult Very Easy

10. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to have a conversation about sexual boundaries, such as what sexual behaviors and activities you are comfortable or not comfortable doing with him or her?

Very Difficult Very Easy

11. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to talk to your partner when you sense there is something about your sexual relationship that seems to be bothering him or her?

Very Difficult Very Easy

12. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to tell your partner that you are not happy with the amount of time you spend together?

Very Difficult Very Easy

13. How easy would it be for you to use the verbal communication skills you know to talk to a partner about safe sex practices (such as using contraceptives or getting tested for HIV/AIDS)?

Very Difficult Very Easy

14. How easy would it be to use the verbal communication skills you know to tell your partner about something he or she does within your sexual relationship that makes you happy?

Very Difficult Very Easy