Speaking Up: How Social-Evaluative Threat Impacts Classroom Discussions and What to Do About It

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A student sits in a seminar course. He is prepared, engaged, and motivated to perform well in the course. At multiple points in the class session, he has something worth sharing—an answer, question, or comment that would enrich the discussion. Yet, he is silent, not once speaking up.

This situation is not uncommon. In fact, it may be the modal experience. Most classroom discussions—and group discussions more generally—look the same in terms of participation. Regardless of group size, discussion tends to revolve around a few individuals (Bales, 1950; Fritschner, 2000; Howard & Baird, 2000; Karp & Yoels, 1976), whose speaking turns come in concentrated bursts dubbed “megaturns” (Dabbs & Ruback, 1987). Most instructors would agree that this typical pattern is less than ideal. They would also agree that the above problem—a motivated, engaged, but nevertheless reticent student—is worth addressing. There is more at stake than the quality of classroom discussion; a student who does not participate may eventually disengage and lose motivation. Here, I consider what the field of social psychology has to offer in terms of understanding the problem and how to solve it.

This article is not intended as a comprehensive review of all possible approaches to improving classroom discussions. There are many potential solutions, such as systematic turn-taking, actively soliciting comments from quiet students, or providing alternative forms of participation (e.g., online forums, private emails to the instructor) that fall outside of the scope of this review (for a more exhaustive review, see Rocca, 2010). I will focus on the standard free-for-all discussion format, which depends on students volunteering their participation. I will explore the social-psychological context that this format creates and the forces that instructors and students can harness to improve participation.

The Social Psychological Context: Social-Evaluative Threat

One of the most salient and important features of a free-for-all class discussion—from the viewpoint of a student deciding whether or not to speak up—is that it can elicit social-evaluative threat (Dickerson, Greenwald, & Kemeny, 2004). Speaking up provides the specter of social evaluation—it is an opportunity for judgment, by the instructor and by one’s peers. This threat may be magnified if one worries about confirming a negative stereotype of a group or social category to which one belongs, a phenomenon called stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

The Trier Social Stress Test

Imagine that you arrive to participate in a psychology experiment. You are told that you will give a 5-minute speech. In this speech, you must articulate your strengths to a panel of judges, who you
believe are trained to detect stress and nervousness. You have only 3 minutes to prepare and cannot use any notes during the presentation. As you deliver your hastily-prepared speech, the judges watch stoically, periodically jotting down notes. This is a major component of the Trier Social Stress Test (Kirschbaum, Pirke, & Hellhammer, 1993) and it can be terrifying. It has been used by psychologists for decades to study how social-evaluative threat affects both psychology and physiology. Psychologically, people often experience intense anxiety during the Trier Social Stress Test. Physiologically, people typically experience a pronounced spike in the stress hormone cortisol, even during the pre-task, anticipatory phase (Kirschbaum et al., 1993).

Speaking up in class may not be as aversive as giving an impromptu speech but it involves many of the same psychological processes, including the same social-evaluative threat. Thus, it may be possible to encourage prepared-but-reticent students to speak up by identifying and leveraging factors that provide a psychological buffer against the intense stress of social-evaluative threat.

**Social Support and Belonging**

A major factor explaining how people respond to stressors is the presence (vs. absence) of others. Social support buffers against various stressors, including social-evaluative threat (DeVries, Glasper, & Detillion, 2003; Kikusui, Winslow, & Mori, 2006). In one illustrative study, participants—men who were either married or cohabitating—prepared for the 5-minute presentation either alone or in the presence of their partner, who had been instructed to provide support (Ditzen et al., 2008). The men then performed the task without their partner. Cortisol levels revealed a clear benefit of social support: compared to men who prepared alone, those who had prepared in the presence of a supportive partner had cortisol levels that were significantly lower, whether measured before, during, or after the task.

If the presence of others helps, does it matter who those people are? Perhaps the presence of others only buffers social-evaluative threat if there is a shared social identity, a sense of belonging to a single group. One study tested this possibility using a group version of the Trier Test (Häusser, Kattenstroth, van Dick, & Mojzisch, 2012). The authors manipulated the extent to the participants felt like they were part of a unified group rather than a collection of dissimilar individuals. In the “social identity” condition, participants wore name tags that displayed their group name, were referred to as a single group, and contemplated characteristics that they shared with their fellow group members. In the “personal identity” condition, participants’ individual identities were emphasized—for example, instructions referred to them individually rather than to their group, they wore individual name tags, and they contemplated characteristics that distinguished them from the other participants. All participants then took turns performing the presentation task in front of their group. Compared to those in the personal identity condition, those in the shared identity condition displayed a significantly blunted cortisol response, indicating a less pronounced physiological stress response.

This research suggests that how the student sees the other participants in the discussion—for example, as unsupportive strangers or supportive, familiar, ingroup members—can make a big difference in
determining whether the prospect of speaking up elicits social-evaluative threat or not. This underscores the importance of building a sense of community and trust in the classroom (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Fortunately, people are remarkably good at bonding into cohesive groups based on minimal cues (Tajfel, 1970). Instructors could use group names and reminders of shared traits—even trivial traits—to create a general sense of group identity and belonging. An advantage of this approach is that it can be applied even to large classes. These interventions can create a shared identity without requiring extensive interaction among the students. That is, a student doesn’t have to personally know the other students to feel socially connected to them. Students could take advantage of the threat-buffering influence of social support by arranging to take classes with friends. Alternatively, if they find themselves in a class with strangers they could try to quickly befriend some of their classmates.

Reappraisal of Physiological Arousal

Even in the absence of social support or a sense of belonging, there are steps one can take to mitigate the stress of impending social evaluation. Stress is a joint function of demands and resources—people become stressed when they believe the demands of the situation exceed their personal resources to cope with those demands (Lazarus, & Folkman, 1984). From this view, the aforementioned benefit of social support works by expanding the range of perceived available resources to include others (Beckes & Coan, 2011). But even when alone, there are ways to change the stress equation. For example, because it is perceived—not objective—resources that matter, one can reappraise the situation to increase perceived resources. One way to do so is to reframe how one interprets his or her physiological arousal (Jamieson, Mendes, & Nock, 2013; Jamieson, Nock, & Mendes, 2012). Typically, one interprets arousal as a sign that one lacks personal resources, that one is not prepared to cope with the demands of the situation. Recent studies, however, have tested the effect of telling participants that the physiological arousal that they experience during stressful situations is the body mobilizing resources—reframing arousal as a resource that facilitates performance. Compared to those who are not given these reappraisal instructions, these participants are less bothered by threatening stimuli and display more adaptive physiological responses during stress (Jamieson et al., 2012). Reappraisal even improves performance on math GRE problems, including performance on the actual GRE taken months later (Jamieson et al., 2010). This finding highlights the broad potential impact of reappraisal. Successfully managing, or mitigating, the stress of social-evaluative threat may facilitate not only classroom participation but also other academic tasks, such as test-taking, that have a clear evaluative component.

How might an instructor apply these insights in the classroom? The most direct translation—having instructors train students to reappraise their physiological arousal in stressful situations—might be tricky. Participants in the aforementioned studies may have assumed that the experimenter providing the reappraisal training was an authority on the subject. If the effectiveness of the reappraisal instructions depends on the perceived legitimacy of the source (a possibility not assessed by the researchers), it may be difficult for instructors to convincingly deliver reappraisal instructions. A history Professor telling
participants about the true meaning of physiological arousal may not have the intended effect. Instead, an instructor could find an authoritative description of the value of the physiological stress response for coping. This could be a short video or article that instructors have their students watch/read before taking an exam.

Students can also be proactive in this regard. If they recognize their own lack of participation, they can proactively familiarize themselves with a few authoritative studies on the nature of the human stress response. Armed with this knowledge, and confidence in its legitimacy, they may be able to successfully reappraise their stress responses when they occur.

**Sense of Power and Control**

So far, the interventions I’ve outlined for combating social-evaluative threat focus on coping with its presumed negativity. But, social evaluation isn’t always a bad thing—a social-evaluative context provides the possibility of being judged favorably. If the prospect of speaking up evokes social-evaluative threat, one way to combat it is to boost one’s confidence that one can provide a high-quality response. Indeed, students typically list confidence as a primary factor impacting their own level of class participation (Armstrong & Boud, 1983; Fassinger, 1995; for a review, see Rocca, 2010).

One factor known to be important for confidence is one’s sense of control—the feeling that one has influence over major aspects of one’s life. A sense of control drives confidence and optimism. People are more optimistic about events that they believe are controllable, explaining the *optimistic bias*—the tendency to regard negative events as more likely to happen to others than to oneself (Klein & Helweg-Larsen, 2002).

One way to boost a person’s sense of control is to provide them with the psychological experience of power (Fast et al., 2009). When people feel powerful, inhibitions lose their hold, compelling people to take action and pursue important goals (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). In one study, thinking about a time when one had power increased the likelihood of initiating a competitive interaction (e.g., a negotiation; Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007). Most importantly, the psychological experience of power reduces stress (Carney et al., under review; Sherman et al., 2012). It also reduces the fear of negative evaluation and, as a result, improves performance in the Trier Test (Schmid & Mast, 2013).

Altogether, this research on power, control, and fear of evaluation suggests that students who feel a sense of power and control are likely to speak up when they have something to say. For a student who is confident and expecting to be judged favorably, the threat of social evaluation is not an obstacle to participation. It may even encourage participation. In this way, power and confidence may transform social-evaluative threat from a stifling obstacle into a potent catalyst for productive and lively discussion.

In devising ways to boost students’ sense of power in the classroom, it may be possible to borrow...
directly from the research methodology. Laboratory power manipulations are diverse, ranging from explicit and time-consuming tasks (e.g., writing about a time when one had power; being the “leader” or “manager” in a dyadic task) to subtle and indirect changes in context or behavior (e.g., adopting “powerful,” expansive postures; Carney et al., 2010). On the more indirect end of the spectrum, the instructor could alter the classroom setup so as to boost the experience of power or to make low-power experiences—including low-power physical postures—less likely. Research has established that something as simple as the chair that one sits in can impact feelings and thoughts of power. In one study, researchers had participants sit in either a “professor’s” chair—a large, cushioned chair—or a smaller, simple wooden “guest” chair that was lower to ground. Participants who sat in the higher, more physically impressive, chair were more likely to have power-related concepts come to mind and to behave as if they were powerful (Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001). This simple manipulation seems to leverage the strong tendency to associate power with elevated vertical position (Schubert, 2005).

Guided by this research, an instructor could ensure that the classroom contains no “low-power” seats (e.g., those that are low to the ground or in the back of the room). Similarly, students who know that they have trouble speaking up could try to avoid these low-power positions within the classroom and instead find a position that will help encourage feelings of power and confidence.

More generally, removing low-power seats aligns with a broader goal of striving to equalize the experience of power within the classroom. Classrooms that have seats that vary in power (front of the room versus back of the room) may exacerbate already-existing power or status asymmetries in the classroom, especially if the most confident individuals seek out the high-power (i.e., front row) seats. Seating configurations that minimize asymmetries among types of seats (e.g., a circle instead of rows) may help equalize the experience of power and flatten any inherent power hierarchies.

Conclusion

Without outside intervention, a few outspoken individuals will dominate class discussions (Bales, 1950; Fritschner, 2000; Howard & Baird, 2000; Karp & Yoels, 1976). At least part of the problem is that social-evaluative threat can keep otherwise prepared and engaged students from speaking up and joining the discussion. There are several social-psychological forces that can help overcome this threat. Each force acts, in one way or another, on the idea that the threat of possible social evaluation need not be paralyzing. Consideration of these forces points to the following pieces of concrete advice for instructors and students.

- Create and highlight shared group identity. Students, take classes with friends or befriend unfamiliar classmates. Instructors, create and use symbols of class identity.
- Provide authoritative reminders of the adaptive value of physiological stress.
- Use seating configurations that minimize power asymmetries.

As long as one has the resources—real or perceived—to cope, social-evaluative threat can be neutralized or even harnessed to promote lively, high-quality, class discussions.
Further Reading (with concrete advice):
http://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/strategies/Pages/increasing-participation.aspx
http://www.cte.cornell.edu/teaching-ideas/engaging-students/increasing-student-participation.html

References
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