

MANAGING THE INHIBITING EFFECTS OF COMMUNICATION ANXIETY AND SHYNESS ON CLASS DISCUSSION

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ABSTRACT

The scene is as old as teaching itself. The professor poses a question for class discussion, and, while a small handful of eager students raise their hands to speak, most are frozen in their seats. The mute students adopt the deer in the headlights posture in an attempt to become invisible to the teacher. Some appear to be quite agitated, and, if called upon directly, become flustered as they struggle to speak.

The paper suggests that many of these students are suffering from two debilitating physical/psychological responses: Communication Anxiety (CA) and Shyness—a psychologically and physiologically uncomfortable double-whammy that makes classroom discussion difficult for some students and impossible for others.

Speaking in a small group of peers is shown to produce Communication Anxiety. Data is presented from U.S. subjects ($n = 842$) and Australian ($n = 140$) business people, and graduate and undergraduate students that reveals that 75.0% say they would experience communication anxiety “speaking with a group of peers sitting around a table.”

The authors discuss how CA and Shyness—two common human conditions—cause many students to become overwhelmed by uncomfortable body feelings and a “fight or flight” psychological response that can only be relieved by avoiding communication. The students respond to this perceived threat with a general survival/coping strategy: they refuse to speak, or they say just enough to get the professor to move on to someone else and thus relieve their discomfort.

Classroom-tested methods for managing CA and Shyness are offered including, 1. Identification of four classroom situations where Communication Anxiety is likely to occur, and, 2. Six practical steps professors can take to create a classroom environment that will keep students' anxiety low.