



Youth Views of Experiences and Benefits of Public Speaking

Ben Silliman

Department of 4-H Youth Development and
Family and Consumer Sciences
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC
ben_silliman@ncsu.edu



Youth Views of Experiences and Benefits of Public Speaking

Ben Silliman
North Carolina State University

Abstract: Ninety-eight youth participants, ages 9-17, involved in a public speaking event reported that preparation and presentation of a 5-12 minute demonstration or illustrated talk improved confidence, knowledge of a selected topic and skills in communicating, goal setting, organizing, working with others, and doing research. Positive benefits were reported from first-year as well as multi-year participants. Most youth surveyed indicated that they participated by choice and received adequate assistance in preparation for speaking. Similar results were found for a smaller group (N=20) involved in a non-competitive performing arts event. A randomly-selected group (N=37) interviewed about the extended effects of public speaking revealed that the experience helped them in school presentations, community leadership, and more in-depth involvement in specific topic areas. Implications of results for youth programming and engaging wider audiences of youth are discussed.

Introduction

Public speaking has been regarded as a critical program activity from the early years of 4-H (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). Life skills refined in public speaking such as research, goal-setting, organization, oral communication, and self-confidence are often cited as critical workforce (Kane, et al., 1992), civic (Brockman, Tepper, & MacNeil, 2002; Michelson, Zaff, & Hair, 2002) and family (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003) assets. Public speaking skills are among the most frequently cited benefits of 4-H participation by current and former 4-Hers (Fox, Schroeder, & Lodi, 2003). However, the climate and impact of 4-H public speaking events, if evaluated, are not often reported in professional journals. Thus, a pilot study was developed to assess participant views of the experience and benefits as a first step in developing a more thorough evaluation of public speaking and other life skills.

Since the study was largely exploratory, youth worker experience and anecdotal reports led to the following hypotheses:

1. All projected outcomes (e.g., goal-setting, organization, research, communication, subject matter learning and confidence) will be valued, but confidence and subject matter learning will be most valued;
2. No differences in perceived benefits will be evident by gender, age, years of experience, or performance scores (null hypothesis);
3. No differences in level of perceived benefits will be evident by type of presentation (topical or creative performance).

Method

Ninety-eight of 108 youth participants in North Carolina 4-H Northwest District Activity Day (DAD) completed a one-page survey (see Attachment A) on the experience and benefits of this public speaking event. In addition, an age-stratified sample (N=37) was randomly selected for 10-15 minute interviews (see Attachment B) with experienced youth professionals and volunteers regarding the broader impact of participation. Youth completed surveys and interviews after their presentations but before the awards ceremony to minimize stress effects on presenting and reduce halo effects of judges' feedback on their self-evaluation.

Approximately one-half of participants were in the 11-13 year age group, with fewer in the 9-10 (23.5%) and 14-18 (25.5%) age groups. Mean and median age of participants was 12 years. A majority of participants were female (N=63), white (N=90), with most doing individual, rather than team, presentations. About half the youth (N=48) were presenting for the first time, but nearly one-third (N=28) were involved three years or more. One-third had placed first or second in district or state competition in previous years.

An additional 19 participants in a non-competitive creative performance activity also completed the survey. Due to differences in the purposes of events and overlap in participants (8 performers also presented topics), separate analyses were conducted for Presentation and Creative Performance groups. Data was analyzed using SPSS-PC, Version 15.

Results

Presentation Contest Participants

Nearly all presentation contest participants reported that their decisions to present were due to

- personal interest (N=81),
- urging of others (N=50),
- rewards such as money or a trip to 4-H Congress (N=42),
- enjoyment of speaking (N=34), and
- competing with friends (N=26).

Over half (N=54) indicated both internal and external influences on participation. Only seven youth cited external factors such as the urging of others or rewards as sole influences on participation.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, youth indicated that preparation and competition helped them build self-confidence, learn more about their topic, and build other learning skills. The vast

majority viewed participation as very helpful (mean scores from 3.54 to 4.33 on a 5-point scale) in every life skills area. Paired-samples T-tests indicated significant differences between Confidence and Communication means ($p < .005$) and between Subject-matter Learning and Working with Others ($p < .002$). These results are reported in Table 1. Other mean differences were non-significant. Cronbach alpha reliability for the Outcomes scale was .77.

Table 1

Level of Benefits of Public Speaking as Viewed by Youth Contestants

(number responding from N=98*)						
	Little		Some		A Lot	Mean
Self-confidence	0	7	11	21	57	4.33/5.00
Learning about my topic	3	7	12	27	49	4.14
Communicating ideas to others	4	0	17	34	37	4.09
Organizing ideas	4	24	30	34	34	4.02
Setting and reaching goals	5	8	10	33	39	3.98
Working with others	6	12	20	27	32	3.69
Doing research	10	9	21	31	25	3.54

- Cumulative totals less than 98 reflect missing data

Note 1: Significant differences ($p < .05$) between Confidence and all but Learning from Topic; between Learning from Topic and Working with Others, Research ($p < .02$).

Youth views of the benefits were moderately correlated, as follows: Youth who reported that the event boosted Self-Confidence also reported increases in Working with Others ($r = .42$; $p < .01$) and Goal Setting ($r = .40$; $p < .01$). Those who felt helped with Subject Matter Learning were also likely to report that presentations helped in Research Skills ($r = .52$; $p < .01$). Similar patterns were observed between Research Skills and Organization ($r = .42$; $p < .01$), Communication with Goal Setting ($r = .42$; $p < .01$), Working with Others ($r = .42$; $p < .01$), and Organization ($r = .40$; $p < .01$). Smaller, but significant correlations were detected between most other variables. Non-significant correlations were found between Confidence and both Subject Learning and Research Skills, and between Communication Skills and both Subject Learning and Working with Others. Years of participation was correlated significantly only with improved Research Skills ($r = .23$; $p < .05$) among all life skills outcomes. Interview results discussed below corroborated and extended survey results.

Hypothesis 2 was supported by a non-significant Independent Samples T-test by Gender and non-significant Oneway ANOVAs comparing self-perceived outcomes by Age group (9-10, 11-13, 14-18 competitive categories), Years of Experience groups (1, 2-3, more than 4 years). Independent Samples T-tests by Performance Score group (e.g., above and below median on total of three judge ratings) was significant for only one outcome, Subject Matter Learning ($p = .018$). Judging rubric reliability was high ($\alpha = .91$).

Interview Results

Over 80% of youth interviewed agreed that they were able to apply knowledge and skills gained in public speaking, including subject matter, goal-setting, organization, communication, and working with others to school, work, and other social settings. Nearly 90% reported greater self-confidence as a result of participating. Youth most often commented on continuing subject matter learning: "I want to learn more in-depth about cats...fly fishing...nutrition..." "I will major in music...pursue a career in nursing..." Many comments implied application or expansion of life skills such as goal-setting, organizational, and communication skills in and out of school: "I am able to teach workshops...give speeches...do music...teach dance classes..." A few also noted

areas for growth: "I don't follow through yet...I am a little nervous [during speeches]..." Youth were least likely to report application of presentation experience in research and study skills, yet 78% agreed that participation made a difference in those endeavors.

Most youth interviewed indicated that participation had improved school performance especially with self-determined projects (84%), volunteer skills (81%), and ability to relate to others (94%). Youth commented that subject learning enabled them to work effectively with livestock and pets as well as people, express themselves and work in groups. Many youth noted how public speaking had increased their self-confidence: "[It] helped in school presentations, Irish dance, and instruments...helped to know what I can do...I used to be shy but now am more confident...I am more confident in riding, soccer, and speaking to others."

Other Factors Surveyed

Most youth in this study reported that they received about the right amount of help in understanding the topic (55%), preparing a speech (48%), and practicing the speech (46%). About 10% reported a little less help than needed, while about 20% felt help was a little more than needed. Youth were more likely to indicate that they received much more help than needed (16-22%) than not as much as needed (1-4%). The Help scale reliability was $\alpha=.72$ and correlations among items ranged from $r=.40$ to $r=.57$. Program climate at the District Activity Day was rated positively, although the Climate scale reliability was less than ideal ($\alpha=.53$). Almost all youth (85-99%) viewed event rules and judges as fair, room arrangements adequate, and audience friendly. Program climate items were moderately correlated.

Youth views of the climate for preparation and competition represent a significant, if brief, program quality check. Both preparation and event reports indicate a fair and supportive climate. Evidence for program quality supports the claim that helpful outcomes derive from the program itself rather than extraneous factors.

Creative Performance Participants

Thirteen girls and six boys, mostly in the 11-13 and 14-18 year-old groups, who participated in the non-competitive "4-H Entertains" event valued opportunities to build performance skills. Eighteen of 19 cited personal interest as their principal motivation, with 8 mentioning external influences. Hypothesis 3 was not supported as Performers perceived the helpfulness of their experience in a slightly different order than presenters: Goal-setting ($X=4.28$), Confidence ($X=4.17$), Working with Others ($X=4.06$), Organization ($X=3.89$), Communication ($X=3.72$), Subject Matter Learning ($X=3.53$), and Research ($X=2.83$). Independent Samples T-test comparisons of groups found significant differences in level of perceived benefits only for Communication and Research. Presenters gave higher ratings on both life skills. Performers were likely to say they received about the right amount of help and were generally satisfied with the climate of the event.

Conclusions and Implications

Participation and Recruitment

Although this study was brief and exploratory, results suggest that public speaking events are positively regarded by and have significant impact on young people. In general, youth participated by choice with social, competitive, and personal development motivations outweighing external incentives. Thus peer invitation, emphasizing the opportunities to share favorite subjects, will likely prove the most effective recruiting strategy for the event. Program

outcomes for current participants suggest that a wider audience might benefit from the public speaking experience. Marketing research with a cross-section of youth might lend insight on barriers and incentives to engaging in public speaking. Special interest events such as science fairs could enable youth to share interests briefly and informally and receive coaching that might interest them in a more formal presentation opportunity.

Developmental and Learning Processes

Confidence and Subject Matter Learning were considered the most helpful outcomes of the presentation experience. This finding is consistent with event objectives and youth motivation to explore and share a favorite topic. Goal Setting and Working with Others were viewed as most important by performers, consistent with the self-determined and topic-free focus of this event. Additional research is needed to better understand the processes by which these events help youth grow in confidence and life skills. However, findings suggest that public speaking serves as a valuable self-directed expressive skill that fosters competence, confidence, and when associated with club activity, represents connectedness. Lerner, et al. (2005) identified these elements as building blocks for positive youth development.

Interview results suggest that public speaking experiences prepared youth for contributions such as club and class leadership, community service, and citizenship. This pattern of applying lessons from speaking supports the notion that contribution emerges from a context of confidence and competence (Lerner, et al., 2005). However, more research is needed to better understand how these experiences compare to and complement other activities in the development of life skills.

Differential Benefits to Participants

All life skills outcomes were highly valued by youth, with few differences by age, gender, years of participation, or performance scores. Significantly, experiences were perceived as helpful by those whose performances judged positively as well as not-so-positively. Youth viewed their experiences as beneficial from the first year of participation and those who continued reported confidence, subject matter learning, and life skills growth with each experience. Moreover, youth typically apply these skills in other settings. Public speaking events, like other project-based experiential learning, provide a context in which youth at different levels of experience can benefit in their own way. Thus the same event may foster successive growth experiences and applications. More research is needed to document these processes of change and the learning experiences that facilitate them. Research with non-participants and non-continuing participants would help youth professionals better understand limits and benefits of public speaking for 4-H members and broader youth population.

Connections Between Life Skills

Views of life skills outcomes were moderately correlated. This finding is not surprising since public speaking cultivates many skills simultaneously. Also, enjoyment of the presentation experience may enhance perceptions of all elements. Gains in confidence were most highly correlated with life skills such as communication, goal setting, and working with others but not significantly correlated with subject learning or research skill gains. Those who valued research skill gains were more likely to report that presenting enhanced their knowledge and organizational skills. These trends suggest that youth view public speaking as increasing confidence, regardless of gains in expertise. However, research skill was the only outcome significantly correlated with years of experience.

Early experience may be most likely to yield general benefits such as confidence and organizational skills that later aid youth in pursuing more in-depth knowledge and research skills. It is also likely that the meaning, as well as the degree, of perceived helpfulness-of-event or skill growth varies across individuals, particularly by age and experience. In-depth and longitudinal research on public speaking experiences will be needed to adequately explore these patterns of growth and meaning.

Overall, the vast majority of responses on or near the “about right” category for preparation suggests developmentally-sensitive coaching and/or effective youth-adult collaboration in preparing for presentations. Mean scores indicate a consistent pattern of assistance from research through practice, with youth most likely to say that they received too much help during the practice phase. Ongoing observations and feedback from youth and adults would be helpful in documenting these processes, especially differences between first-time and more experienced participants. In general, youth rated the climate of the District Activity Day very positively. Future research might provide a more extensive list of climate factors and determine both their meaning and importance to presenters from different age groups.

Limitations

This study engaged a convenience sample of largely white, middle class 4-H youth who may not be representative of all Public Speaking event participants or of the broader youth population including those who choose not to participate or those not selected for district competition. Additional in-depth and longitudinal designs including unbiased observers as well as participant self-report could provide a more detailed and accurate description of the presentation experience and benefits. However, the high reliability of the Helpfulness and Judging Rubric scales and the extensive examples provided in interview speak to the credibility of self-report methods. Moreover, the general conclusions derived from the data seemed reasonable to experienced coaches and judges who reviewed them.

Summary

Evidence from this exploratory study points to the immediate and sustained impact of participating in a public speaking and creative performance events, including self-reported improvements in confidence, subject-matter learning, and life skills. Personal interest was a more important motivator for participation than external influence. More in-depth and long-term research on event conditions and effects with a more diverse and randomly selected audience would provide further insight on the role of public speaking experience in youth and young adult development.

Results from the 4-H Public Speaking experience suggest that all youth organizations could enhance youth life skills growth by incorporating public speaking opportunities in their programming or partnering with a 4-H program locally. Public speaking is often cited among the experiences people fear most. Thus, qualities of positive youth development programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002) such as emotional safety, adult support, structured learning and presenting, peer encouragement, and making a difference through sharing and applying subject matter and life skills lessons are especially important in optimizing the experience of presenting or performing. Informal opportunities for speaking in club meetings and community settings support and extend the formal opportunities of a contest in 4-H programs.

References

- Brockman, M.S., Tepper, K.H., & MacNeil, C. (2002). Leadership. Retrieved online February 15, 2007 at <http://cals-cf.calsnet.arizona.edu/fcs.content.cfm?content=leadership>
- Eccles, J., & Gootman, J.A. (Eds., 2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Fox, J., Schroeder, D., & Lodl, K. (2003). Life skill development through 4-H clubs: The perspective of 4-H alumni. *Journal of Extension*, 41(6).
- Kane, M., Berryman, S., Goslin, D., & Meltzer, A. (1992). *The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills: Identifying and describing the skills required by work*. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Labor, <http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS>
- Kumpfer, K.L., & Alvarado, R. (2003). Family strengthening approaches for the prevention of youth problem behaviors." *American Psychologist* 58(6/7):457-65.
- Lerner, R.M., Lerner, J.V., Almerigi, J.B., Theokas, C., Gestsdottir, S., Naudeau, S., & et al. (2005). Positive youth development, participation in community youth development programs, and community contributions of fifth-grade adolescents: Findings from the first wave of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 25(1), 17-71.
- Michelson, E., Zaff, J.F., & Hair, E.C. (2002). Civic Engagement programs and youth development: A synthesis. Washington, DC: Child Trends. Retrieved online February 5, 2007 at www.childtrends.org/files/Compendium_Phase1_Intro.pdf
- Wessel, T., & Wessel, M. (1982). 4-H: An American idea, 1900-1980. Chevy Chase, MD: National 4-H Council.

Acknowledgements

4-H Extension professionals in the Northwest District of North Carolina provided critical assistance in development and implementation of this evaluation project. They included Barbara Swanson, Terri Bost, April Bowman, Beth Davis, Tracy Carter, Sara Drake, Julie Jones, Peggie Lewis, Morgan Maness, Melissa Staebner, and Judy West.

APPENDIX A

4-H Presentation Skills Learning

You are asked to complete this survey because you are participating in the 2007 4-H presentation activity day in your district. There are no right or wrong answers. Your answers about the program will help 4-H improve the Presentation Skills event in years to come.

Presentation Topic: _____

Presentation format (check one): Individual Group

Years in presentation contest: ____

Highest award ever received in presentation contest (county district, or state): _____

Age ____ Gender ____ Race _____ County _____

Why did you decide to do a presentation this year? (check all that apply)

- a) I was interested in the topic
- b) I like to speak to groups
- c) I enjoy competing with my friends
- d) Someone else (adult or friend) urged me to do it
- e) Reward (money, a ribbon, etc.)

How has participating in this 4-H presentation event (preparation and competing) helped you in each of the following areas? (circle one number for each item):

	Little		Some		A Lot
Learning about my topic	1	2	3	4	5
Doing research	1	2	3	4	5
Organizing ideas	1	2	3	4	5
Communicating ideas to others	1	2	3	4	5
Setting and reaching goals	1	2	3	4	5
Working with others	1	2	3	4	5
Self-confidence	1	2	3	4	5

How much help you received from adults or friends in preparing your 4-H presentation? (circle one number for each item):

	Not as much as I needed		About right		More than I needed
Helped me understand my topic	1	2	3	4	5
Helped me prepare my speech	1	2	3	4	5
Helped me practice my speech	1	2	3	4	5

Describe your experience at 4-H District Activity Day (circle one number for each item)

	Not at all True		Somewhat True		Very True
Rules were clearly explained to me	1	2	3	4	5
Judges were fair	1	2	3	4	5
Room was arranged well for me	1	2	3	4	5
Audience was friendly	1	2	3	4	5

Thank you for participating in this survey and helping 4-H *make the best better!*

APPENDIX B

4-H Presentation Skills Interview

You are invited to complete this interview because you are participating in the 2007 4-H presentation activity day in your district. 4-H would like to know more about how this activity, from preparation through this contest, has been helpful—or not-so-helpful to you. There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to hear about your experience. Your answers about the program will help 4-H improve the Presentation Skills event in years to come.

How have your 4-H presentation experiences affected you in each of the following areas?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I want to learn more about my subject Examples:	1	2	3	4
I use the subject knowledge I gained Examples:	1	2	3	4
I use research and study skills for other projects Examples:	1	2	3	4
I use organizing skills for other presentations Examples:	1	2	3	4
I can communicate ideas well in many settings Examples:	1	2	3	4
I use goal-setting skills to get things done Examples:	1	2	3	4
I can work well with others Examples:	1	2	3	4
I am self-confident in most things I do Examples:	1	2	3	4
I have improved my school performance Examples:	1	2	3	4
I have improved my volunteer or work skills Examples:	1	2	3	4
I have improved my ability to relate to other people Examples:	1	2	3	4

Child's name _____

Thank you. Your time and ideas about 4-H presentation contest will help us make the best better.