ISSN: 2473-4901
v10 n6160

The Virtual Stage: Metaverse Integration in Effective Speaking Courses

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Abstract

This research examines the implementation of virtual reality into an effective speaking course at a small business college in New England. The researchers detail how they piloted the use of MetaQuest 2 headsets to students for round-the-clock availability of public speaking software in an Effective Speaking course. Students were administered a pre- and post-survey to gauge their feelings about public speaking before and after the virtual reality intervention. The results indicate statistically significant improvements in speech confidence and anxiety level reduction. In addition, student attitudes toward VR exposure in the classroom are overwhelmingly positive.

Keywords: virtual reality, metaverse, public speaking, education, experiential learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtual Reality (VR) is a technology that resides in the Reality-Virtuality Continuum (Milgram et al., 1995). On the one end, you have the real environment (Reality); this is the non-digital world we live in. On the other end, you have a fully digital environment (VR) in which the entire environment is digitally constructed. Along the continuum, you also have Augmented Reality (AR), where virtual objects are overlaid in a real-world environment, and augmented virtuality (AV), where real objects are projected into a virtual world.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for non-real environment solutions with an emphasis on remote work and remote learning capabilities. The World Economic Forum (2022) went as far as stating that VR will reshape the future of education, highlighting that while online educational tools were critical to overcoming the challenges posed by the pandemic, they were limited in that they lacked experiential learning. This is where innovative technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality come into play. It is imperative for academic institutions to understand how VR may fit into the curriculum.

VR uses computer modeling and simulations to allow individuals to be fully immersed in an artificial 3D environment (Abich et al., 2021). There are three types of VR systems: non-immersive, semi-immersive, and total immersive (Moro et al., 2016). Non-immersive consists of environments visualized in conventional technology, such as monitors and screens. Semi-immersive comprises a combination of real and virtual environments for simultaneous interaction. Total immersive includes three-dimensional simulated environments using head-mounted displays. The latter two levels are considered the metaverse (Hwang & Chien, 2022). The objective of VR is to make the user feel like they are inside the computer-generated system (Saeed et al., 2017).

Although VR technology has been available since the 1960s, recent developments in equipment and quality have allowed mass adoption in the gaming and entertainment industries (Wohlgenannt et al., 2020). Given these advancements, it has been stated that the metaverse is the future of the internet (Bhattacharya et al., 2023; Cui et al., 2022; Ramesh et al., 2022; Ritterbusch & Teichmann, 2023).

The high levels of immersion offered in VR systems can potentially enhance conceptual understanding in academic applications (Holly et al., 2021). Student activities with increased engagement are found to help their overall learning (Carini et al., 2006; Patterson et al., 2023). However, a comprehensive literature review of VR applications in academia found that the technology is not widely used despite enhancing student learning (Alfarsi, 2021).

Increased engagement in public speaking courses has excellent potential for impact. According to Zhou et al. (2021), approximately 77% of the public fear public speaking. Virtual reality provides a unique solution to this issue, as individuals can experience a learning point of view during intimidating situations while staying sheltered (Halarnkar et al., 2012). A meta-analysis of virtual reality on public speaking indicates an overall statistically significant effect of anxiety reduction (Lim et al., 2023).

Although the benefits of metaverse adoption in academia and public speaking are plentiful, VR usage has consequences. For example, research shows that cyber-sickness is prevalent among VR application users (Martirosov et al., 2022). Cost and user experience are also problematic in hindering widespread adoption (Kavanagh et al., 2017). According to a systematic review of 61 papers examining VR in education, user perception and impact have not been explored in detail (Noah & Das, 2021). This paper fills a research need to understand both student perspectives and the impact of VR in academic settings.

This paper details the deployment, application, and student experience of VR headsets during a pilot in an effective speaking course at a small business college in New England. Each student is required to take an effective speaking course to graduate. Throughout the course, students are required to perform weekly presentations, group presentations, participate in workshops, and participate in an elevator pitch competition.

This research aims to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: What are students' attitudes toward implementing VR technology in the pilot course?
- RQ2: How might increased immersion resulting from VR influence student learning outcomes in public speaking?
- RQ3: How does VR influence engagement within an effective speaking course?
- RQ4: In what ways might negative side effects, such as cyber-sickness and headaches, impact the adoption of VR in academic settings?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Hwang and Chien (2022), research on metaverse applications in academia is relatively infrequent despite the tremendous learning potential that recent technological advances have brought. Much literature denoting educational applications of the metaverse focuses on learning second languages (Alwafi et al., 2022; Gruber & Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020; Muthmainnah et al., 2023; Netta et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023; Yuan et al., 2023).

Investigations in non-academic settings revolving around the impact of VR on public speaking are well established. Research by Reeves et al. (Reeves et al., 2021), utilizing a randomized control trial, found that VR exposure reduced public speaking anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. According to Anderson et al. (2013), a randomized control trial reported VR interventions to exhibit significant improvement in all measures of public speaking for individuals diagnosed with social anxiety disorder.

Despite these results, implementing VR headsets

embedded with public speaking training software in a college-level introductory public speaking course found that the technology did not reduce public speaking anxiety (Kryston et al., 2021). It is essential to investigate the results of VR in higher education as much research indicates students fear public speaking (Grieve et al., 2021).

Students may be unique adopters of the technology. According to Frydenberg et al. (2024), VR exposure at a business school showcased varying attitudes among students, as some showed interest while others struggled to connect their prior experience with VR gaming to business applications. Further supporting this argument is a study that deployed VR headsets in an introductory communication course, indicating that the technology both hindered and enhanced students' abilities to practice communication skills (Frisby et al., 2020).

This investigation contributes directly to previously limited knowledge surrounding VR's impacts on introductory-level communication courses. The researchers present both statistical results of exposure to the technology and detailing student attitudes toward usage. Establishing information about VR technology provides insights to instructors about potential adoption. New technology does not always provide students with enhanced public speaking skills, as Clark and Jones (2001) found no differences between face-to-face courses and online offerings.

3. METHODOLOGY

Meta's Meta Quest 2 devices were set up in the Meta for Business application, a mobile device management (MDM) tool for controlling features and deploying software within headsets. The researchers purposely decided to put no device restrictions on the accounts. Thus, some students may have chosen to use their headsets for entertainment.

The first half of the semester was spent configuring the headsets, training the deployment team, and working with IT so they were prepared to support the rollout. For the last six weeks of the semester, students enrolled in the pilot course *COMM-257 Effective Speaking* received MetaQuest 2 headsets to take home. Before receiving the headsets, students were asked to consent to participate in research and complete a Qualtrics survey (note that students could opt out of the survey and still participate in the pilot program). The questions asked are detailed in Appendix A.

Each headset came equipped with the VirtualSpeech application along with all the default applications that came with the headset. VirtualSpeech is VR professional development training software that offers paths of learning such as compelling storytelling, sales pitch and closing, salary negotiations, job interview preparation, business networking, and elevator pitches. On the day the headsets were distributed, students were given a hands-on lesson on setting up their accounts and logging into VirtualSpeech. Students were encouraged to complete the public speaking mastery learning path for skill enhancement. All tasks in VirtualSpeech were voluntary and not included in the final grade calculation.

The professor of the course was from the Communications department and had little to no experience with VR but was enthusiastic about its use. According to the professor of the pilot course, it was easy to incorporate the headsets into the course for several reasons. First, VR is playful, and young students find engaging in gamification to learn easier. Second, the technology is unique and compelling for all ages. Third, using VR technology in the context of learning gives students many choices and is empowering as their use and availability of choices negates top-down learning styles present in traditional classroom pedagogical settings.

Analytics included for administrators of VirtualSpeech software include total VR time, number of sessions per student, and the specific learning paths or courses completed. Information describes how many speeches each student finished and their corresponding overall score. The application also provides an automated analysis of each speech. Students are graded based on eye contact score, words per minute, voice volume, filler words, and listenability. In addition to students receiving instant feedback on areas to improve through their scoring, instructors may easily embed performance analytics as part of course evaluation.

A significant benefit of each student having their headset for six weeks is the continuous availability of a virtual avatar audience for practicing speeches. The tool allows students to gain instant assessment at any time of the day or night.

Upon returning the headsets to class during the last week of the semester, students were asked to complete a post-survey. This post-survey

ISSN: 2473-4901
v10 n6160

included Likert scale inquiries to match the pre-survey and open-ended responses to understand their attitudes and feelings toward VR.

Research questions are answered from the pre- and post-survey results of students exposed to VR within the effective speaking course (n=15). According to the software's analytics, the average time spent on VirtualSpeech throughout the pilot was 4.5 hours per student, while time spent on entertainment and other applications was not tracked. It is to be noted that many students downloaded applications with virtual meeting spaces as evidenced by a) the library of apps and b) meta users met/engaged with. Although unexplored, these other applications may have provided another outlet for students to practice their public speaking.

Students were asked six questions, all with a 7-point Likert response scale, to help researchers quantify the impact of VR on their public speaking skills and course experience. Questions included their feelings of anxiety, comfort level, and confidence before giving a speech. Satisfaction with past speeches and student perspectives on the importance of public speaking were also included. The last question gauged student enjoyment in the effective communication course.

Mean responses from the pre-and post-survey are statistically analyzed to understand potential significant outcomes better. Although the responses appear normally distributed to a certain degree (see Figure 1 in Appendix), and only the anxiety variable results in rejecting the Shapiro-Wilk normality test, a Wilcoxon signed-rank test is performed in place of the traditional paired t-test.

The sample size used in this analysis is too small to approximate a normal distribution as assumed in the t-Test, thus the reasoning behind opting for the Wilcoxon (Taheri & Hesamian, 2013). The Wilcoxon test offers a more stable result with low observations (< 30) or non-normal distributions (I.C.A & Ebuh, 2012).

At the end of the post-survey, open-ended questions were asked to evaluate attitudes toward the pilot program qualitatively. Given the small sample size, the answers were visually analyzed to provide insights into student perceptions of the pilot program.

4. RESULTS/STUDENT FEEDBACK

The average age of the sample was 18 years old with every student having a class rank of freshman. 67% percent of respondents were female. 80 percent of students were enrolled to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree compared to the 20 percent enrolled to obtain a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration.

The mean question responses, exhibited in Figure 1, indicate a sharp drop in feelings of anxiety before public speaking. Comfort, confidence, and satisfaction increase noticeably, while course enjoyment marginally improves. Interestingly, importance drops a small amount from pre- to post-public speaking.

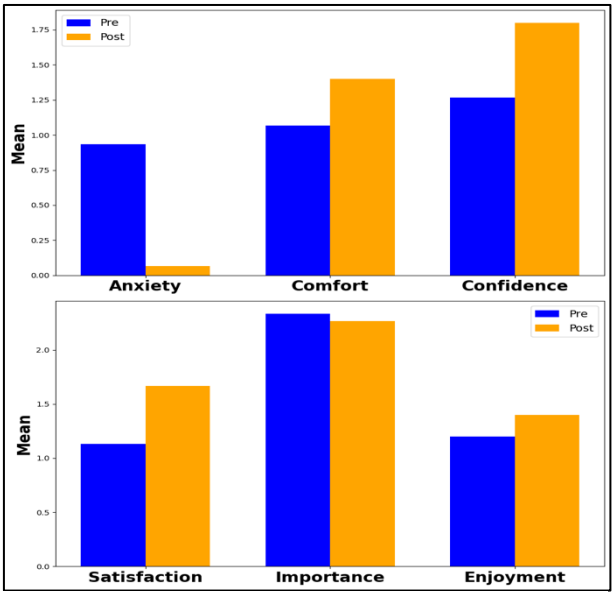

Figure 1: Pre- and Post-Survey Mean Values

The Wilcoxon test results are exhibited below in Table 1.

Question	Pre-mean	Post-mean	Wilcoxon P-value
Anxiety	0.93	0.07	0.025852*
Comfort	1.07	1.40	0.327489
Confidence	1.27	1.80	0.033471*
Satisfaction	1.13	1.67	0.103483
Importance	2.33	2.27	0.705457
Enjoyment	1.20	1.40	0.453695

Table 1: Wilcoxon Test Results

In answering RQ2, the findings indicate that students experienced a statistically significant increase in public speaking confidence and a statistically significant decrease in anxiety before giving a speech. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test reported no significant difference in student enjoyment of the course. The desired course learning outcomes of increased confidence and

decreased speech anxiety may be, at least partially, attributed to the VR intervention.

Impacting both student anxiety and confidence provides VR with potentially powerful outcomes. Communication departments are seeking best practices for reducing public speaking anxiety, as this topic is a standard goal of introductory courses (Hunter et al., 2014). Additionally, increased public speaking confidence is often a significant advantage for undergraduates completing a basic communication course (Finn et al., 2009).

Regarding RQ3, course satisfaction, and course enjoyment both increased from the pre- to the post. Although not statistically significant, these results may provide insights into student engagement throughout the course.

To answer RQ1, the quotes below were obtained as part of the open-ended responses. Visual analysis indicates an overwhelmingly positive experience.

- "I found it to be helpful to get my words straight for my speech."
- "It helped me have a mock audience and be able to say my speech out loud before I had to present."
- "Virtual speech helped me improve my public speaking confidence."
- "Felt like it helped me feel more comfortable in front of real people."
- "It was fun and helped me a lot."
- "It helped me be better as I was able to feel like I was presenting in front of people."
- "I didn't use it. I didn't find any huge use in practicing with a headset on."
- "Improved my public speaking."
- "It helped in many ways and gave me many different outlooks on different speeches."
- "It has helped me."
- "Great impact on my public speech."

Next, students were asked to describe their experience using the VR headset. The following are quoted directly from the post-survey:

- "It was fairly enjoyable."
- "It was relatively easy to use."
- "It was a fun, good experience."
- "I really enjoyed using the virtual reality headsets."
- "I loved it!"
- "It was super useful and fun."
- "It was fun and easy to use."
- "It was a cool experience."
- "It was fun for the games besides the virtual speech but again I lost interest after one day."
- "It was a lot of fun."
- "It helped me to practice for the real speech in class."
- "Sometimes got loose beside that totally fine."
- "It was a good, fun experience."

In addition to the quotes, most of the feedback reported to the pilot's professor during class meetings was about the fun factor instead of the effectiveness of the learning modules. This is not surprising, as this was the program's first rollout, and it serves as a basis for moving forward regarding student directives and course expectations.

Regarding RQ4, the survey asked respondents if they experienced headaches or dizziness while using the VR headset and, if so, how they dealt with it. Seven students reported getting headaches while using the VR system. One student reported that the headaches would occur after an hour and a half of continuous usage. Five students said they removed the headset and stopped using VR whenever the headaches occurred. No students reported that negative side effects were a reason to abstain from the headsets. It is important, however, to recognize that students cannot perform academic activities for extended times without getting cyber-sickness.

In addition to using the headset for practice with public speaking, students were asked how else they used VR. 12 students responded that they utilized the technology for YouTube, Netflix, and gaming.

The last question asked students if they had suggestions for improving this experience for future offerings. Most responses included "None" or "No," while one student asked for more virtual speech lessons and another opined that more outside applications, other than VirtualSpeech, should be incorporated.

According to the instructor presiding over the pilot course, there are a few areas for improvement. Items to improve for future semesters include more directives regarding class expectations for their use and closely monitoring the data generated to improve compliance rates in real-time. VR headsets may still be used for entertainment purposes with increased course

directives.

Per the instructor, the VR headsets can be effective in helping students feel okay about talking in front of people since you can create a virtual classroom of avatars to replicate how that might feel in person. Students can recreate feelings that are hard to reproduce in our day-to-day lives. Surprisingly, this VR classroom can also help create a more vital consciousness in students who spend much time mindlessly scrolling their phones. Student feedback in recent semesters indicates that when a student speaker looks out at a group of peers primarily on their phones, they feel their presentations diminish. It is "hard to concentrate" on the content they have created and practiced. In this scenario, everybody loses as the student speaker's scores go down, the presentation may not be as vibrant as it originally was, and they feel far less confident as they perceive that nobody is listening to them. The avatars that exist now are listening, non-phone-holding, engaged students.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results corroborate previous research (Reeves et al., 2021) , indicating that VR applications have the potential to reduce public speaking anxiety and promote increased communicative confidence. The Wilcoxon test's statistical evidence, accounting for the small sample size, provides empirical evidence supporting VR training enhancing student learning outcomes.

Additionally, student attitudes toward using technology in the course are overwhelmingly positive. One student lost interest after one day, but 11 other students felt VR exposure was fun and valuable. The students' perspective on the VirtualSpeech public speaking training software was a significant driver of positive insights for deploying VR headsets in future public speaking course offerings.

According to the instructor: "Using technology that fits into a contemporary tech consumption landscape is the best way to reach young students who see school and particularly public speaking as something quite undesirable overall. The potential for this fun toy to be a real and functional tool is high."

One limitation of this study is the small sample size. 21 students received headsets, and only 15 completed both the pre- and post-survey. Positive response bias may be shown throughout the results, as students having a better experience with the headset may be more likely to fill out the survey.

A further limitation of this study is the need for a control group. Causal inference of the intervention of VR exposure cannot be stated during this investigation. Students' anxiety reduction and increased confidence levels may be partially attributed to spending six additional weeks in an effective communication course. Evaluation of student attitudes toward using the technology signifies that the statistical results found in this paper can, at least partially, be attributed to the intervention of VR headsets.

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ISSN: 2473-4901
v10 n6160

APPENDIX

Label in Paper	Question Asked	Response Items
Anxiety	I feel anxious before giving a public speech or speaking in a public setting	Strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, agree, strongly agree
Comfort	I feel comfortable speaking in front of a group of classmates	same as above
Confidence	I am confident in my ability to deliver a presentation clearly with good vocal projection	same as above
Satisfaction	I have been satisfied with my past performance when delivering a public speech	same as above
Importance	I feel effective communication is important for my future job	same as above
Enjoyment	I enjoy the effective communication course	same as above

Likert scale values were coded as follows:

Strongly disagree = -3, Disagree = -2, Somewhat disagree = -1, Neither agree not disagree = 0 Somewhat agree = 1, Agree = 2, Strongly agree = 3

Table 1: Quantitative Survey Questions

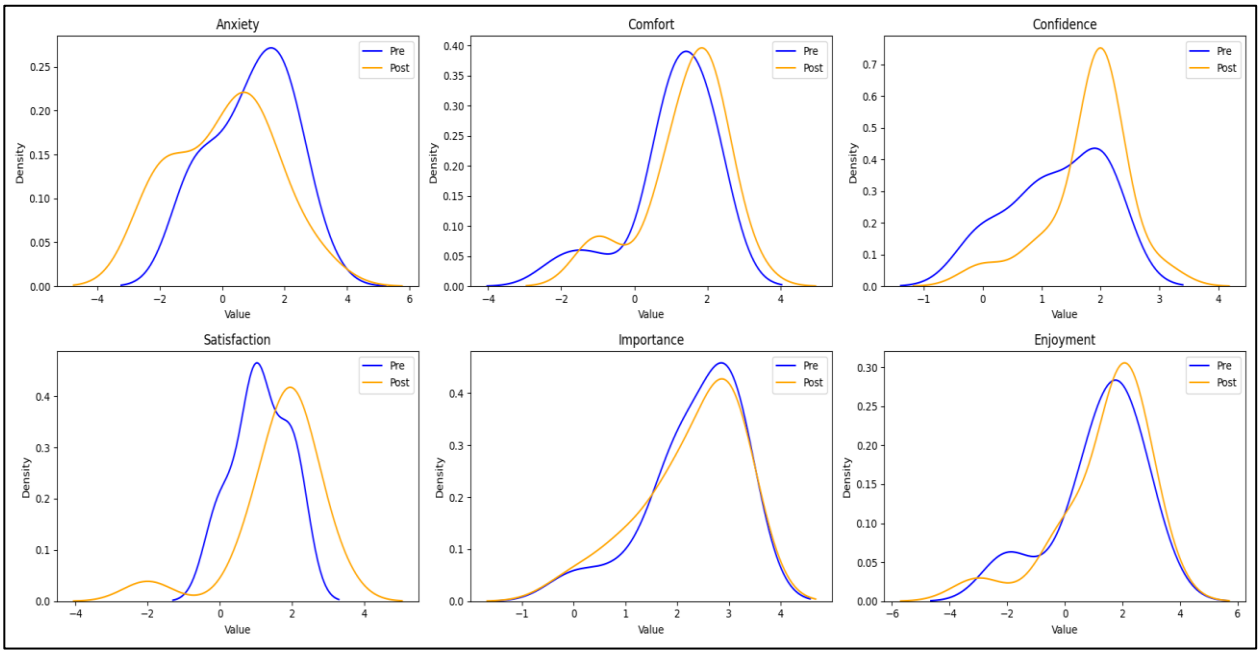

Figure 1: Distribution of Quantitative Questions