Self-Talk: Mentoring and Empowering Faculty to Contribute to Organizational Change

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Abstract

Hersman (2018) espouses that we can effectively mentor if in possession of qualities to empower mentees which include: effective communication skills, knowledge of the professional realm, enthusiasm, passion and the ability to create an equitable and supportive organizational environment with the mentee. The authors of this article propose that self-talk (ST) or inner speech, is a helpful means of inspiring mentors, colleagues, teachers, and friends in navigating communication challenges with themselves and others. Cutton, Killion, & Burt (2015) have suggested a three-step approach to implementing ST for the purpose of mentoring: that involves (1) awareness of the ST they are currently using (2) follow-up with the mentee's active reflection of and recording of the ST, and finally, (3) actions that changes their use of ST. While conversations in social speech serve as the primary method for communicating with others, this article implores that ST has a variety of functions that are situation specific and transformational.
Self-Talk: Mentoring and Empowering Faculty to Contribute to Organizational Change

Irrespective of discipline, faculty at universities are faced with stressors that can negatively impact job performance. University faculty perform functions that are comprehensive in scope, which include teaching and mentoring students, garnering funding for research, preparing papers, presenting at conferences and attending to the service needs of one’s college, department, school or organization (Tan, 2017). In these roles, it is not uncommon for faculty to express self-evaluative statements that cause them to doubt their ability to do their job effectively. This “self-talk” (ST) provides a means by which one can practice communication skills that will assist them in responding to every day struggles and life-changing events (Barber, 2013). As a growing area of interest, it is plausible that a focus on ST could be of benefit to professionals in higher education kinesiology as they navigate through their careers.

Self-Talk: An Overview

The study of ST in relation to faculty development and performance enhancement in higher education has not been widely researched. What is known comes from studies conducted in the areas of developmental, clinical, and sports psychology. In analyzing the work of Vygotsky (1987), it
was assumed that ST, or “interior dialogue”, diminished after early childhood. However, several recent studies demonstrate that ST regularly occurs across the life-span, irrespective of group affiliation, gender or cultural, and ethnic differences.

Calvete and Cardeñoso (2002) along with Hardy (2006), and Theodorakis, Hatzigeorgiadis, and Zourbanos (2012) broadly define ST as a cognitive, communicative process that represents an individual’s thoughts about themselves, others, and the world around them. It is verbal in nature, multidimensional, and dynamic. ST can be spoken aloud or privately in one’s mind as a means of: (a) interpreting one’s feelings and perceptions, (b) self-evaluation and regulation, and (c) self-reinforcement/critique or instruction (Fernyhough, 2016).

To the latter point, ST conveys information in the form of words that can be reframed and applied as a self-regulatory strategy (Kross, et. al., 2014). Reyes (2016) extols the idea of ST as consequential, as it not only “informs us of emotions, thoughts and ideas that we already may have”, but also is an important cognitive ability that affects attention and appraisal processes to meet cognitive and emotional demands (p.10).

Reyes also notes that previous research categorizes ST into two overlapping dimensions: valence (positive or negative) and function
Positive forms of ST are typically associated with increased self-efficacy, emotional regulation ability, and the experience of positive emotion states regardless of situational experience. Self-efficacy may be enhanced because of the motivational comments to the self from the self because of less worry and more positive thinking, even in adverse conditions (Latinjak, Hatzigeorgiadis, & Zourbanos, 2017; Zourbanos, et al., 2016). Negative forms of ST are most commonly associated with threat appraisals, less perceived social support, increased anxiety, and less resilience. Perception and the resulting actions from spontaneous ST have revealed a strong negative effect on performance because of persuasive negative emotions (Latinjak, Hatzigeorgiadis, & Zourbanos, 2017).

Furthermore, ST research has found that it both functions as and enhances motivation. It also provides instruction and direction for a focus of attention and allows for the processing of information during reflection and preparation (Cutton, Killion, & Burt, 2015; Hardy, 2006; Theodorakis, et al.). Performers are better able to focus on and process effectively what is most important at a critical point in time, even in stressful and hectic situations.

**Mentoring in Higher Education Kinesiology**

Our purpose in this article is to inspire mentors, colleagues, teachers, or friends to serve as agents of change in organizations for the betterment
of others and thereby, urge them to effectively socialize and communicate with themselves and others through the effective use of ST. Through the effective use of ST (themselves and helping others with their ST) mentors can: (a) encourage collaboration, (b) serve as agents of change, and (c) help foster interpersonal relationships so critical especially to underrepresented faculty. Thinking about our ST, “gives us a clearer sense of how our consciousness is peopled by social agents…internal self-talk has its origins in interactions with people, and that it represents the different perspectives of the social agents that constitute it” (Fernyhough, 2016, p. 222). An ideal mentor is described as someone who serves as an exemplar and guide to an individual as they move from a place of dependency and inexperience towards independence and proficiency (Nakamura, Shernoff, and Hooker 2009). Mentoring done correctly is empowering as it opens avenues for collaboration, goal attainment and problem solving. As kinesiology faces unique challenges for women and diverse faculty in these times, mentoring is an essential means of raising consensus within the discipline with a significant role in preparing kinesiology scholars (McClain, Bridges and Bridges, 2014).

Corbett (2016), in her insightful article *Mentoring the Next Generation of Higher Education Professionals*, has a perspective similar to what can be
found in the AACTE paper “21st Century Knowledge And Skills In Educator Preparation” (2010) that described key principles and skills that are required for educators. She notes that today’s faculty are expected to be technologically literate, with the ability to be prolific researchers, and civically engaged. These expectations are to be met, while negotiating through various forms of marginalization, discrimination, power shifts and systemic dysfunctions (Corbett, 2016; Menges & Exum, 1983; Smith, 2015). Corbett concludes her remarks by imploring the academy to be intentional in creating *transformative* and inclusive mentoring opportunities, a sentiment endorsed by Hodge and Wiggins (2010) who “offer recommendations to increase the presence and improve the experiences of African Americans in KPE programs” (p. 35). Burden, Harrison, & Hodge (2005) also expounded on the lack of representation for faculty, with particular emphasis on power relations and work climate:

“The African American faculty …were disadvantaged from (a) their White peers’ holding dominant power; … (c) *lack of mentoring* by White colleagues; (d) social isolation and marginalization in a chilly climate (non-supportive colleagues, which resulted in them disengaging from these peers).” (p. 45)
Muschallik and Pull (2016) in their research on mentoring in higher education and productivity recommended that irrespective of discipline, mentors perform three different roles: that of a teacher, a sponsor, and/or a collaborator. In the role of a collaborator, the mentor fosters interactions and collaborative opportunities, (formal or informal) for the mentee.

Hersman (2018) supported Corbett’s suggestion for transformative opportunities, by providing guidelines for how mentoring in an organization can be transformative to persons seeking to embark on this endeavor. Hersman cites that colleagues can effectively mentor if they possess effective communication skills, knowledge of the professional realm, enthusiasm, passion, and the ability to create an inclusive and supportive environment with mentees. Additionally, it is understood that in order to achieve optimal growth multiple mentors may be necessary, as they likely do not excel in in all of these areas.

Certainly, the aforementioned characteristics of a mentor are important; however narrowing down to one as the most essential is an ambitious undertaking. When a distinguished panel of professionals in kinesiology at the NAKHE organization Annual Conference in 2018 were asked the question of: “What did they consider the most important
characteristic for a mentor to have? An emphasis on communication was the panel’s overwhelming response.

Cutton, Killion, and Burt (2015) recommend a three-step approach towards helping someone implement their use of effective ST for communicating in a variety of environments. Environments include many types of organizations, including educational institutions and professional societies. These steps involve first, the mentor helping their mentee to become aware of the ST that they currently use in a variety of situations. For example, awareness of the ST while teaching, and at professional service or research meetings is needed. Second, ensure that the mentee follow-up with active reflection of previous experiences and chronicling of the ST used on numerous occasions. Encourage reflection upon what was “said”, and how it was “said”, by memory or even by making a note of previous ST—including a digital or written record. Third and finally, the experienced mentor can provide and encourage the active, intentional strategies to change the use of ST, depending upon the different environments encountered. Strategies may include rehearsing the ST they plan to use, such as preparing via ST what they will say in response to a particular question or reaction from a student or colleague. As these guidelines are followed, it is key that all parties involved make note of how
and what type of ST is being used and routinely reflect upon its level of effectiveness and subsequent outcomes.

**The Promise of Self-Talk Awareness**

ST has been suggested as a method for creating space, or the ability to withdraw from a situation temporarily and allow the mentee to be aware, realize, eventually address what is happening-- including how to handle certain situations (Morin, 2005). Individuals in the role of mentor and mentee participate in an engaged and potentially transformational experience, using the principles of ST. Established professionals, those that are leaders in research, teaching, and service, are typically considered experts in their field (Arreola, Theall, & Aleamoni, 2003). However, many inexperienced, or diverse faculty may feel inadequate, facing pressure to fit into the cultural and professional expectations deemed important by leaders in the field, locally and nationally. The dialogue with themselves and others (ST and speaking)--especially between established and young professionals are critical actions that provide a benefit to their collective development.

**Self-Talk Reflection after the Episode**

Van Raalte (2016) notes that how we perceive others and how they perceive us, affects our reflection of the ST we may have used. This is
particularly of issue if faculty are in environments that are very harmful to their careers. Along with other environmental factors, these perceptions hold influence over our sense of internal self, reflection, and interaction with others. Moreover, irrespective of how others feel about us, our thoughts regarding their intentions (i.e., positive or negative) could create feelings of self-doubt. ST develops and becomes more effective the more that we participate in dialogue with others, so in this sense, ST is social in nature and works in parallel with our thinking and reflection (Fernyhough, 2016). With this understanding, the question of “How does one manage the process of eventually using ST effectively in diverse environments, situations, or settings?” is a fair one.

**Self-Talk Used as a Strategy for Empowering Faculty**

In the practical sense, ST serves as a method by which to enhance one’s ability to communicate with themselves and the world around them. It also provides instruction and direction for a focus of attention and allows for the eventual processing of information during reflection of what has just occurred to the learner, and the what to “say” in response (Cutton, Killion, & Burt, 2015; Hardy, 2006; Theodorakis, et al.). In a typical scenario, ST can be used to help the assistant professor to be aware of what they were going to say or “do”, in the hopes of also preventing errors in speaking too
soon or harshly, or communicating incorrectly with administrators, colleagues, students, or staff. For example, an assistant professor may initially say to themselves, “I am not sure what [insert name of chairperson] will think of my comments.” A comment later may be phrased to inspire deeper reflection and clarify intention, “My reason for wanting to take on this project is twofold…” After the conversation, reflecting on how the interaction went and altering what could be said later is in order. As a motivating force, ST is eventually useful as a strategy to help us be intentional and precise as professionals when needed.

Using ST as a strategy for improvement has promise for faculty irrespective of their role or career stage. Junior faculty need guidance to meet the challenges of the institution and profession. The numerous aspects of research, teaching, service, and professional development are areas that many faculty need time to adjust to as they begin their career in higher education. Use of ST to prepare and improve: lectures, research presentations, and implementation of a service project with students can all be useful examples. Therefore, the effective use of ST may help empower them to be: (a) more effective teachers, (b) productive writers and researchers, and (c) better able to recognize their service role within their profession.
Diverse and underrepresented faculty also could benefit from the application of ST as a strategy. Research by Russell (2008) suggested that one’s ethnic background affects ST implementation, based upon the variety of circumstances, settings, or environments. Furthermore, the previous research discussed by Burden, Harrison & Hodge that revealed a lack of support to disadvantaged African-American faculty, needing access to effective mentors and support for frequent interactions with other faculty members. Effective mentors could then encourage diverse faculty to incorporate ST into their repertoire as a strategy aimed at developing effective communication skills with themselves and others. Communication, as mentioned earlier, is a very important characteristic for mentors to possess, and ST can foster voiced communication--as its effective use has been shown even early in life to improve self-regulation and development (Berk, 2001; Weintraub, 2015).

Encouraging all faculty members and empowering them in a way that they will feel comfortable infusing their gifts across campus, the surrounding community, and in professional organizations could initially be a difficult task. Many underrepresented professionals that work in a variety of educational institutions, especially early in their careers may need help with perseverance and empowerment at times to enhance their chances for
success (Whittaker, Montgomery, & Martinez Acosta, 2015). This is particularly of issue if faculty are in environments that are caustic, negative, demeaning or even dangerous to their careers and personal life. Like junior faculty, diverse and underrepresented faculty can also benefit from effective use of ST, but may need additional and ongoing encouragement and advocacy by mentors to help them navigate difficult or inequitable situations.

**Conclusion**

ST is the manner with which we dialogue with ourselves and prepare for, or reflect upon, our conversations with others (Fernyhough, 2016). As previously mentioned, ST, or inner speech has a variety of functions that can be used in numerous settings. Through the examination of ST, we can also begin to understand “the personal, cultural, and psychological significance” of the roles we have in the profession (p. 235).

More work is needed to uncover how ST can affect socialization and similar functions that provide a “guide or mapping device through life” (Wiley, 2006, p. 321). Wagstaff (2019) in discussing research on sport organizational change and mental skills training, notes that individual interactions can be enhanced by those who are able to be social agents of change in the organization. Whether we serve as the guide for someone
else, or choose to be the navigator for ourselves, ST as a strategy for mentoring may help to enhance the profession and improve faculty members' personal growth. If it is assumed that individuals have considerable influence on one another, perhaps we can serve as influential agents of change for others we may encounter.
References


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