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Teaching Anxiety and Teaching Methods of University Professors:
A Correlational Analysis

by

Ian Fraser, Michael Houlihan, Kim Fenwick, Tom Fish and Christin Möller

St. Thomas University,
Fredericton, New Brunswick,
Canada. E3B 1T7

Address all correspondences to:

Ian H. Fraser, Psychology Department, St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. E3B
1T7

Email: fras@stu.ca

Phone Number: 1-506-460-0322

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Abstract

Teaching anxiety continues to be one of the most significant problems facing university faculty members. However, few investigations of teaching anxiety have been directed at this population. This study examines different types of teaching anxiety and their relation to various teaching styles. A survey of faculty members was conducted which included an anxiety questionnaire and a teaching style inventory with the goal of identifying which teaching styles are related to anxiety. In general, faculty members experiencing high levels of anxiety tended to avoid potentially anxiety-provoking situations by minimizing contact with students.

Key Words: Stress and Pedagogy

Teaching, especially at the university level, has been identified as one of the most stressful types of work (Kinman, Jones, & Kinman, 2006; Kyriacou, 2001). Sorcinelli (1994) found that 33% of first year faculty find their work very stressful. By the end of 5 years, this number increases to 71%. Kinman (2006) observed that psychological distress was higher in university teachers when compared to other professions. In fact, the only group with higher psychological distress was the recently unemployed.

One factor related to stress in university teachers is workload. Perceived pressure from overall workload is so great that only 40% of university teachers in the UK take their full annual leave entitlement (Kinman & Jones, 2004). Indeed, full-time faculty report working an average of approximately 54.0 hours per week which is 14.0 hours above the American national standard (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004b). In a recent study, working overtime was rated as the number one stressor by university professors (Hogan, Carlson, & Dua, 2002). Despite such long work-weeks, many faculty members still feel that they do not have sufficient time to complete their work. Remaining up-to-date on developments in their fields due to time constraints appears to be a particular problem (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004a).

Teaching at the university level is particularly stressful due to the unique demands of the professoriate and lack of teacher training for professors (Fish & Fraser, 2001). Teachers in K-12 receive extensive training before being hired, and their job centers around teaching. Most university faculty members do not receive formalized teacher training and their time is split between teaching and research (Gardner & Leak, 1994). Recent cost-cutting measures have exacerbated the problem by increasing student to faculty ratios and decreasing research funding, with no corresponding decrease in the requirements of research productivity or teaching excellence (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 1998, 1999, 2005).

While the demand for improvements in teaching quality has increased, this requirement has not been matched with the resources to accomplish this goal (Samad, Fraser, Fish, & Fraser, 1995). Sorcinelli and Billings (1992) stated that *pressures were accentuated by the incongruencies between teaching demands and the reward structure* (p. 8). Faculty members are expected to improve teaching quality with little or no support thereby leading to a dramatic increase in teaching anxiety. In sum, university teachers are being required to do more with less, thus taxing their coping resources even further.

Teaching anxiety is a prevalent problem affecting faculty at all stages of their careers. The following three quotations are sample comments from university teachers reflecting on their experience in the classroom: *Lecturing terrifies me...* (Dr. Weston); *I walk into every class really afraid I'm going to blow it...each time I pass out the [student] evaluations, I worry* (Guy Allen); *I hate getting up in front of big groups* (Dr. Weston). These quotations all come from winners of the prestigious 3M awards for excellence in teaching (Ford, 1993). As the quotations indicate, even the most successful university teachers experience teaching anxiety.

Teaching anxiety is common and unpleasant. However, it is important to recognize that a moderate level of anxiety may be helpful. This principle has been expressed more formally as the Yerkes-Dodson law

(Yerkes & Dodson, 1908), which states that the level of performance forms an inverted "U" function of arousal. While both very low and very high arousal levels lead to poor performance, a moderate level is associated with optimal performance. Moderate levels of teaching anxiety can provide the energy necessary to be an effective instructor while too much anxiety will be detrimental to both teaching and health.

Gardner and Leak (1994) identified three aspects of teaching that may lead to anxiety. These three aspects include activities related to (1) preparation for teaching; (2) anticipation of teaching; and (3) interaction within the classroom. Overall, 87% of the psychology professors reported experiencing teaching anxiety. Of these, 57% rated this anxiety as definitely unpleasant, severely unpleasant, or extremely unpleasant. A large percentage of the respondents stated that symptoms of anxiety appeared prior to the first day of class, consistent with the concept of anticipation of teaching. The three most frequently reported activities that produced anxiety were (1) speaking before a class; (2) preparation for teaching; and (3) dealing with disruptive students. While points 1 and 2 are consistent with preparation for teaching, the third point exemplifies the category of interaction within the classroom.

Fish and Fraser (2001) expanded the scope of the Gardner and Leak (1994) study by adding a fourth category, general well-being, and surveying the professoriate from a variety of disciplines. For preparation for teaching, the most salient contributing factor was anxiety felt prior to each individual class. For anticipation of teaching, most anxiety was experienced before the first class of the year. Of the questions addressing within-class anxiety, the most important aspect involved returning graded exams and assignments. This activity was followed closely, in terms of anxiety, by dealing with disruptive students. However, the anxiety associated with dealing with disruptive students appears to diminish over one's career. Interestingly, in this sample, one of the least anxiety producing aspects of the within class experience was speaking in front of the class.

The newly added general well-being category was very important. The professoriate believed that teaching anxiety had an impact outside of the work environment leading to a poor sense of well-being and poor physical health. Despite the obviously high prevalence of anxiety, respondents indicated that they were coping well. The inconsistency between the perceived success of coping and the continued prevalence of high levels of teaching anxiety indicates that coping strategies may not be as effective as professors believe them to be (Fish & Fraser, 2001).

Coping has been defined as *constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person* (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Two general classes of coping strategies have been identified: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping involves the control or removal of undesirable feelings linked to the stressful situation. Problem-focused coping encompasses directly dealing with the situation at hand (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

From the perspective of teaching anxiety, the ultimate goal of any coping strategy is to reduce the level of teaching anxiety while maintaining a vibrant teaching environment. Therefore, the use of either

emotion or problem-focused coping may be useful depending on the particular situation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Problem-focused coping is often successful when the events that trigger the stress can be directly adjusted or controlled (Koeske & Kirk, 1993; Lazarus, 1993). Emotion-focused strategies may provide relief in stressful situations in which there are few options for direct action (Koeske & Kirk, 1993; Lazarus, 1993).

In addition to the distinction between problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, coping methods can also be classified as either active or avoidant (Endler, Parker, & Butcher, 2003). Active coping strategies include either behavioural or emotional methods aimed at either eliminating the stressor (i.e., a physical response) or moderating one's emotional response (i.e., a psychological response) to stressful life events. In either case, the negative effects of the stressor are reduced. By contrast, an avoidant coping strategy is one in which the stressor is not addressed either physically or psychologically. Instead, the stressor is ignored. Avoidant coping strategies are generally considered maladaptive and have been associated with greater risks to physical and emotional well-being (Holahan & Moos, 1987).

Faculty experiencing teaching anxiety utilize various coping strategies to deal with stressful events associated with their work. Almost half of all university instructors simply accept the problem or attempt to discuss it with colleagues and friends (Abouserie, 1996). Others choose more maladaptive methods such as shutting themselves in their offices or not going to work at all (Abouserie, 1996). Many of these strategies only target the psychological discomfort instead of the cause of stress (Abouserie, 1996), and can be considered avoidant strategies. The overall effectiveness of such tactics is rated as very low. In one study, almost 30% of participants indicated that their coping strategies were only moderately effective or worse (Fish & Fraser, 2001). It is important to note that the destructive results of stress appear to be minimized by the perceived ability to manage such tension (Blix & Cruise, 1994; Danna & Griffin, 1999).

The purpose of the present study is to relate the level of teaching anxiety to commonly used teaching strategies. This study is a replication and extension of Fish and Fraser (2001). The effects of teaching anxiety will be assessed separately for preparation for teaching, anticipation of teaching, teaching in the classroom, and general well-being. It is anticipated that those suffering from high levels of teaching anxiety will more likely to engage in activities that will distance themselves from their students.

Method

Participants

Forty-two faculty members (26 women and 16 men) at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada participated in the present study. St. Thomas University is a small, primarily undergraduate, liberal arts institution with professional programs in education and social work. Student enrolment is approximately 2600, with a faculty complement of approximately 110 full-time members and approximately half as many part-time instructors.

All faculty members were contacted via e-mail and asked to participate in the study. Of the total number of participants, 22 were either tenured or in tenure-track positions, with the remaining on limited-term, one-year appointments or in part-time, stipend positions. Distribution of participants by rank included 6 full professors, 8 associate professors, 14 assistant professors, and 14 lecturers. Participants' years of experience ranged from 5 years or less (N = 13), to 6 to 10 years (N = 5), to 11 years or more (N = 24).

Materials

To assess levels of teaching anxiety and coping strategies, participants were asked to complete two questionnaires regarding teaching: *Survey of Teaching Anxiety* and *Survey of Instructional Methods and Classroom Settings*. The *Survey of Teaching Anxiety* was developed by Fish and Fraser (2001) using the following definition of teaching anxiety: *any distress that derives from the preparation for teaching, the anticipation of teaching, and interaction within the classroom environment* (Gardner & Leak, 1994). Based on this definition, the *Survey of Teaching Anxiety* consisted of 14 items divided into the following categories: *preparation for teaching; anticipation of teaching; classroom interaction; and perceived effects of teaching anxiety*. In each of the first three categories, participants were asked to rate, on a 7-point Likert-type scale, how much anxiety had been evoked by a given teaching-related activity during the current year, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (to a great degree). In the final category, participants were asked to indicate the effects of teaching anxiety using a 7-point scale.

To assist in developing the second questionnaire, the researchers interviewed nine faculty members, both full- and part-time, and asked them to describe their experience of teaching anxiety and the coping strategies that they and/or other instructors employed. Their responses were used to construct the scale which consisted of 63 items related to communication methods in and out of class, classroom structure, test and examination procedures, as well as strategies used in dealing with disruptive students. For each item, participants were asked to indicate the frequency with which they used each behaviour on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (always).

Procedure

All faculty members teaching at St. Thomas University were contacted by e-mail and asked to participate in an on-line survey regarding teaching anxiety being conducted by an honours student in the Department of Psychology. Participants were assured that their involvement was voluntary, anonymous, and that they maintained the right to withdraw their participation at any time. Faculty members were provided with an internet link that could be accessed if they wished to complete the survey. Faculty members who chose to participate were first asked to complete a demographics questionnaire in which they were asked to indicate their sex, employment status, years of experience, and academic rank.

Upon completion of the demographic questions, participants were asked to complete the *Survey of Teaching Anxiety*, followed by the *Survey of Instructional Methods and Classroom Settings*. At the conclusion of the on-line survey, participants were thanked for their contribution and provided with pertinent

contact information should they have any further questions or would like to request the results of the study upon completion.

Results

The overall mean anxiety scores, along with the mean anxiety scores for males and females for both the current study and Fish and Fraser (2001), are found in Table 1. The overall anxiety scores are similar between the two studies. It is interesting to note that many of the items have a significant portion of respondents that indicated moderate to high anxiety levels (endorsed 4 or higher on the 7-point Likert scale.) Highest anxiety scores were found on the following 3 items: *Teaching anxiety prior to the first class of the year*; *Days that you return and review graded exams and assignments*; and *Dealing with disruptive students*.

Differences in anxiety levels between genders were evaluated by independent groups t-tests. Anxiety associated with preparation for teaching prior to the first class of the year was reportedly higher for females ($M = 3.654$) than for males ($M = 2.750$), $t = 2.066$, $p = 0.047$. There were no other significant differences between males and females in levels of anxiety reported.

Responses to the anxiety items were summed according to the four categories of Gardener and Leak (1994) and Fish and Fraser (2001) of *Preparation for Class*; *Anticipation of Teaching*; *Interactions in the Classroom*; and *Perceived Effects of Anxiety*. Correlations of the summed scores were calculated with items from the *Teaching Strategies Questionnaire*. Significant correlations were found between anxiety and teaching styles ($p < .05$; see Table 2.)

All significant correlations between anxiety and teaching strategies related to class structure and the methods used for student evaluation produced negative correlations. This outcome indicates that the higher the anxiety level the less likely instructors are to engage in these particular strategies. These strategies included: teacher-student discussions; student-student discussions or group work; the use of short written assignments; and the use of attendance in student evaluation.

All significant correlations between anxiety and teaching strategies related to cheating and plagiarism and returning tests/written assignments were positive in direction. This result means that higher anxiety is associated with greater use of these strategies. These techniques included: *Before test/exam, advise of consequences if caught cheating*; *Place tests outside your office and do not go over them*; *Hand out written assignments in class and do not go over them*; *Place written assignments outside office and do not go over them*; *Place written assignments outside your office and take a few minutes to go over major problem areas*; and *Place written assignments outside your office and spend significant amount of time going over most of the test*.

For the techniques that instructors used in dealing with disruptive students, a significant positive correlation was observed between anxiety and the item *Do not take action and hope peer pressure from other students will make him/her stop*. A negative correlation was observed between anxiety and the item *Address the particular student and ask him/her to stop talking*.

Discussion

One purpose of the present study was to assess overall teaching anxiety in university professors and to compare these results with that of Fish and Fraser (2001). Results of the present study, relative to those of Fish and Fraser, indicated that teaching anxiety remains high. Specifically, on 9 of the 14 items, 30% or more of the respondents endorsed moderate to high levels of anxiety (as shown in Table 1), with the overall pattern of reported teaching anxiety being similar to that of Fish and Fraser (2001). Like Fish and Fraser (2001), females reported more anxiety than males before the first class of the year. Unlike Fish and Fraser (2001), the present study did not find gender differences in anxiety related to dealing with disruptive students or the perceived effects of anxiety on physical health and well-being. While these gender differences were not significant in this study, the direction of the effect was similar to findings of Fish and Fraser (2001).

The major purpose of the present study was to determine whether a relationship exists between levels of anxiety and particular strategies used in the classroom. Results indicated that those professors reporting higher levels of anxiety were less likely to: involve students in discourse; use short written assignments; and to use attendance in evaluations. In addition, the higher the level of anxiety the more likely professors were to return evaluations with minimal face-to-face feedback. In dealing with problem behaviours, those with high anxiety were more likely to warn students before testing of the consequences of cheating. However, when dealing with disruptive students, those with higher anxiety were more likely to rely on peer pressure to resolve the issue and less likely to confront the student directly.

Of the findings mentioned above, all of them, with the exception of warning students before testing of the consequences of cheating, appear to fall into the category of avoidant coping strategies. In order to avoid stressful situations, professors apparently limit the amount of classroom discourse and face-to-face feedback with students, and hope that potential problems with disruptive students will be taken care of by other students. The problem with avoidant practices is that they are rarely successful (Endler et al., 2003). In particular, the strategies being adopted by professors are working counter to most universities' mission statements, which typically promote discourse, reasoned discussion and debate. The adoption of these avoidant strategies could result in job dissatisfaction, which is directly linked to the incongruity between jobs expectation and reality (Kinman, 2001). Professors typically know that one expectation of their job is to engage the student in discourse; however, in order to decrease anxiety, many professors adopt strategies which limit such discourse. Knowing that one is not fully meeting job expectations, may lead to job dissatisfaction and to further increases in anxiety levels. In addition to job dissatisfaction experienced by professors, students are also more likely to report dissatisfaction when professors use a detached style of instruction (Kempf, 1996).

In one circumstance however, faculty members with higher anxiety were adopting a problem-focused coping strategy. Specifically, to prevent cheating, they were warning students before the test of the consequences of cheating. This strategy can be effective but should be used with some caution. Too many rules and regulations can stifle the discourse and debate within the classroom.

In conclusion, it has been shown by both Fish and Fraser (2001) and the present study that a high prevalence of teaching anxiety exists among university professors. In the present sample, over 30% of the respondents indicated they felt moderate to high levels of anxiety on 9 out of the 14 items tested on the anxiety survey. Those professors reporting higher levels of teaching anxiety were more likely to engage in activities which limited the amount of discourse taking place in the classroom and the amount of face-to-face interactions they engaged in with their students. These types of teaching strategies are not helpful to either the professor or the student.

One solution may be to introduce alternative and more productive ways of dealing with the anxiety associated with teaching. Before such changes can occur, universities must recognize that teaching anxiety is an important issue and begin addressing it openly in workshops and discussion forums. Many professors still believe it is a personal problem and do not share their experiences with colleagues. Once a discourse has been established, universities need to improve access to the abundance of resources that are already available concerning different types of teaching strategies. There are, for example, a large number of valuable learning and teaching websites across North America that provide information on topics such as: dealing with disruptive students; coping with public speaking; handling large classes; and dealing with controversial topics. Bringing the issue of teaching anxiety to the fore and providing access to resources, may help to reverse the trend toward teaching strategies that isolate the teacher from the student.

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Table 1: Anxiety Levels

Item	Percentage at Least Moderate Anxiety	Current			Fish& Fraser 2001		
		Overall	Females (n=26)	Males (n=16)	Overall	Females (n=27)	Males (n=63)
Teaching Anxiety Experienced in Preparations for Teaching							
Prior to the 1st Classes of the Year	40.48	3.31	3.65	2.75*	3.19	3.59	2.97*
Just Prior to Each Individual Class	42.86	3.50	3.58	3.38	3.12	3.19	3.05
Exams, Assignments, Projects, etc.	35.71	3.21	3.39	2.94	2.91	3.07	2.86
Teaching Anxiety Experienced in Anticipation of Teaching							
Prior to 1st Classes of the Year	55.00	3.80	3.73	3.44	3.26	3.48	3.13
Just Prior to Each Individual Class	36.59	3.22	3.12	3.19	3.18	3.15	3.16
Interactions within the Classroom							
Dealing with Controversial Topics	21.43	2.76	3.81	3.38	3.00	3.70	3.30
Dealing with Disruptive Students	47.62	3.40	3.50	3.25	3.32	3.84	3.11*
Dealing with Student Questioning	19.05	2.50	3.00	2.38	2.41	3.36	2.87
Speaking in front of Class of Students	14.29	2.26	2.23	2.25	2.52	3.00	2.65
Conducting Group Work and/or Class Discussions	16.67	2.24	2.35	2.13	2.73	2.67	2.38
Days You Returned and Reviewed Graded Exams, Assignments, etc.	47.62	3.64	2.65	2.25	3.4	2.67	2.31
Perceived Effects of Teaching Anxiety							
Teaching Anxiety has Negative Effect on your Physical Health	33.33	2.90	3.00	2.75	2.95	3.19	2.81*
Teaching Anxiety has Negative Effect on your Overall Feeling of Well-Being	35.71	3.05	3.23	2.75	3.00	3.19	2.87*
Teaching Anxiety has Negative Effect on your Classroom Environment	26.19	2.57	2.73	2.31	2.49	2.42	2.41

Table 2: Correlation between Anxiety Levels and Teaching Strategies

Question	Preparation	Anticipation	InClass	Effects
Class Structure				
Teacher-Student Discussions				-0.34
Student-Student Discussions (i.e.: group-work)		-0.31		
How Often Do You Use The Following Methods				
Short Written Assignments (1st & 2nd year)	-0.35		-0.45	
Short Written Assignments (3rd and 4th year)	-0.37	-0.33		
Generally, how much value do you assign to attendance in a student's evaluation? (in percentage of total grade -3rd and 4th year)			-0.36	
Cheating And Plagiarism				
Before start of test/exam, advise students of possible consequences if caught cheating:				0.33
Returning Tests/Exams And Written Assignments				
Place tests/exams outside your office and do not go over them	0.36	0.40	0.45	0.41
Hand out written assignments in class do not go over them	0.45		0.37	0.45
Place written assignments outside your office and do not go over them	0.35		0.37	
Place written assignments outside your office and take a few minutes to go over major problem areas			0.35	
Place written assignments outside your office and spend significant amount of time going over most of test			0.33	
Dealing With Disruptive Students				
Do not take action and hope peer pressure from other students will make him/her stop.	0.34	0.36		
Address the particular student and ask him/her to stop talking			-0.42	