
INCORPORATING STUDENT PRESENTATIONS IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

By Laurie Thurneck

Isocrates, a teacher of rhetoric during the Greek Classical period, praised the art of communication as the “source of most of our blessings” (Isocrates 50). He explained that the ability to speak gives humans a unique power to affect the world:

[Through speech] we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. ...If there is need to speak in brief summary of this power, we shall find that none of the things which are done with intelligence take place without the help of speech, but that in all our actions as well as in all our thoughts, speech is our guide (Isocrates 50).

“Incorporating student presentations in the college classroom helps students develop the ability to communicate both within the classroom and in the outside world [and to] ...provide a sense of belonging, which enhances the motivation to learn.”

Isocrates’s inspirational words are placed prominently at the top of my Public Speaking syllabus every semester. Oral presentations, however, do not have to be confined to Public Speaking classes, but could be incorporated into a range of college courses to enhance the learning experience.

The improvement of communication both within and outside of the classroom is promoted by the national Communication-Across-the-Curriculum (CXC) initiative. The first CXC-based program emerged in 1974 at Center College, in Iowa, and since that time, the CXC initiative has gone through a number of changes and challenges. Morreale explains that CXC programs are similar to writing across the curriculum: “Faculty from disciplines other than communication are encouraged to incorporate oral communication activities into their existing courses, to enhance discipline-specific learning and to improve students’ oral communication competencies” (Morreale 14).

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) also recognizes that the improvement of communication competencies, including oral communication, is a central component of general education. The VCCS Policy Manual specifies that Communication is one of seven areas in which degree graduates should demonstrate competency. Among the Communication goals and outcomes are the abilities to “assimilate, organize, develop, and present an idea formally and informally,” “use appropriate verbal and non-verbal responses in interpersonal relations and group discussions,” and “use listening skills” (VCCS Policy Manual).

Incorporating student presentations in the college classroom furthers general education goals, promotes student engagement, and provides an opportunity for students to practice an art that will enhance their lives outside of the classroom. What follows are ideas for how to improve learning through student presentations, guidelines for speaking fundamentals that faculty can share with students, and sample grading rubrics.

Learning through Speaking

It is prudent for faculty to establish early in the semester that participation is expected. Sullivan refers to Newton’s first law of motion to explain the rationale for early involvement in the classroom: “When students are called upon to be involved from the first day of class, there will be less time for them to come to rest and so remain at rest. If we wait until midway through the semester to start getting them on their feet, we fight the laws of physics and typically encounter resistance” (69). Early “icebreaking” presentations should be fun and low-anxiety producing: “There is nothing wrong with having a good time in class! Don’t forget to laugh and have a sense of humor. In doing so, you show students that learning can be fun and that it is not disconnected from the real world around them. The moments that give students happiness are ones they value and share with others” (Quay and Quaglia 1).

- **Presentation Idea #1:** Begin the semester by having students interview and introduce each other in pairs. Present in pairs so that students have someone with them the first time they stand in front of the class.
- **Presentation Idea #2:** Have students read aloud parts of literature, plays, dialogues, or even act them out. Better yet, consider having students write and perform their own dialogue between figures they’ve studied, emphasizing points of difference or similarity (Simmons).

Presentations Create Belonging and Motivation

In addition to establishing a participatory norm, presentations also create a sense of belonging in the classroom, which motivates students to learn: “The more your students feel that they are part of the classroom community, the more likely they are to become connected to the course, the subject, and even the school” (Quay and Quaglia 1). In a study of first-year undergraduate students, researchers found that a sense of classroom belonging is promoted by instructors who encourage student participation and interaction. Encouraging a sense of belonging was “linked with students’ motivation and achievement” (Freeman, Anderman, and Jenson 216-217).

- Presentation Idea #3: Have students present contextual information on historical figures, concepts, or time periods. Set a time limit and require students to use visual aids and a certain number of research sources.

Presentations Promote Responsibility

Presentations also encourage students to see themselves as adults with responsibilities to the classroom learning environment. Deanna P. Dannels, Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at North Carolina State University and Associate Director of the Campus Writing and Speaking Program there, asserts that students are “more likely to take speaking activities seriously if they are designed to enhance and support disciplinary content” (Dannels).

- Presentation Idea #4: In my Western Culture courses, one type of presentation requires students to lead a discussion on primary works that are assigned. Students present five original questions that are designed to elicit discussion. Written work includes the questions and one-paragraph answers to each, and the time limit is ten minutes. Students are required to consult three secondary sources to promote their understanding prior to the presentation. A student made the following comment on an end-of-the semester course evaluation: “Read and Leads really helped me understand the readings and become involved in the class.”

Presentations have a “Real-World” Application

Finally, student presentations encourage creativity, intellectual curiosity, and ownership of the material. Quay and Quaglia assert that “students need to be able to explore and ask the ‘why/why not’ questions. Those kinds of questions encourage them to make their own connections to the subject matter and to be more engaged in the class” (1). Presentations may be linked to an attempt

to introduce project-based learning, which is an educational reform that is designed to promote student motivation.

The core idea of project-based learning is that real-world problems capture students' interest and provoke serious thinking as the students acquire and apply new knowledge in a problem-solving context. The teacher plays the role of facilitator, working with students to frame worthwhile questions, structuring meaningful tasks, coaching both knowledge development and social skills (David).

Proponents of project-based learning believe that it “helps prepare students for the thinking and collaboration skills required in the workplace” (David).

- **Presentation Idea #5:** Have students select debate topics that relate to the course material. Debate topics should be phrased as questions with “yes” or “no” answers, such as “Should euthanasia be legal in the United States?” or “Does music promote brain development?” Students then choose teams, and for each question, one team becomes the “affirmative” side and the other is the “negative.” Each team prepares a presentation that supports its side of the issue while anticipating what the other team is likely to say. The teams deliver ten-minute presentations with two-minute rebuttals to follow. In my classes, students have a good time working with each other to craft their best case and win the debate. Students learn from each other’s strengths and often work through the “real world” issue of conflict resolution.

Speech Fundamentals for Any Classroom

I have been using Stephen E. Lucas’s textbook, *The Art of Public Speaking*, for most of the twenty-five years that I have been teaching Public Speaking. The following tips are gleaned from his book as well as from my experiences in the classroom. It would be impossible to share in this short article all of the principles about the rhetorical tradition and tools that we study in Public Speaking over the course of a semester. Therefore, I have focused on three areas to make these tips as applicable as possible to a wide range of courses: overcoming fear of the audience by meeting their needs for relevance and organization, using visual aids, and delivering the message.

Do Not Fear the Audience; Manage Them!

- Fear of speaking in public is a prominent concern of American adults. This anxiety is generated largely by feelings of self consciousness. It helps to remember that audiences are egocentric, meaning they are thinking much more of themselves than they

are of judging the speaker. The way to win them over is to make the speech meet the needs of this self-interested audience.

- The audience will be the most interested in information that relates to their own interests, lives, and work. Effective speakers connect with the audience and show good will for them by using examples that establish common ground. For example, in a presentation on *Hospitality in Greek Life* and *The Odyssey*, in a Survey of Western Culture class, a student began by talking about the meaning of hospitality in contemporary life and gave relevant examples. We had just experienced a snow storm, and many households in the area had lost power, and so she defined hospitality as helping those in need. She also mentioned that some colleges today provide instruction in hospitality by offering majors such as hotel/restaurant management and tourism. This student gained the audience's attention from the beginning of the presentation by creating common ground that was based on contemporary usages of the term "hospitality."
- Other ways to meet the needs of the self-interested audience are to incorporate appropriate humor, make eye contact, and show that one is knowledgeable and excited about the presentation. If the speaker appears confident and interested in the presentation, it is more likely that the audience will want to listen. It is OK to feign confidence. The audience will not know the difference; and once the speaker starts getting a positive response, his or her confidence will grow.
- In general, the larger the audience and size of the room in which one is speaking, the more formal one's style of language should be. However, even small audiences know that a speech is "special," so language should not be colloquial or peppered with "filler" words such as "like" or "um."
- An audience will hear the presentation only once; written material can be reread many times. Therefore, the audience will appreciate efforts to help them understand the meaning of the presentation by using a clear organizational pattern. If the speech is adapted from a written document, it will cover only key points, not every detail. Use an Introduction, Body, and Conclusion. The rule of thumb is: Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them. In other words, building redundancy into the speech aids listeners. Listeners are not like readers who have the leisure to reread information that they did not understand the first time.

Visual Aids Do Not Have to be Fancy to be Effective!

- Make the visual aid count. The visual aid should add meaning and convey something that one cannot say with words alone. Two of the best visual aids I have seen in my classes have been very simple and traditional, yet have added meaning. One student asked the class to breathe for a few seconds through plastic drinking straws that he had provided. This was to demonstrate what having an asthma attack feels like. Another student filled an empty soda bottle with the amount of sugar that such drinks contain. This was to show hidden and excessive sugars in processed foods.
- Avoid passing visual aids among the audience because this takes the visual aid out of the speaker's control. If a speaker wants the audience to have information to take home with them, it should be distributed after the speech.
- PowerPoint is not always the best choice of visual aid. Choose the type of visual aid that will provide the most meaning. Placing an outline of the speech on slides adds very little meaning for the audience. Instead, slides should be used much like traditional visual aids. For example, designing slides that contain charts, graphs, and/or photographs and showing them at appropriate points in the presentation adds meaning for the audience. The advantage of PowerPoint is that it allows speakers to collect visual aids in one place and click through them with a mouse.

Be Yourself!

- A speaker should focus on communicating with the audience and not on nervousness. Focusing on nervousness makes it worse, but placing one's concentration on the importance of conveying a message makes the nervousness disappear.
- A savvy speaker makes eye contact and channels nervous energy into a display of enthusiasm for the message. For example, if one smiles at the audience, they will smile back and boost the speaker's confidence. Even if one begins with a fake smile, the audience will smile back, and then the speaker's smile will become real and more natural. One should use gestures during the speech just as one would use them in everyday conversation. The audience will not be interested in watching a speaker read a paper; one must engage them with eye contact.

Sample Evaluation Forms

On both formal and informal student evaluations of my courses, students have reported that involvement is promoted by presentations, and I have also heard the comment that presentation assignments must be structured and provide expectations and guidelines. In addition to clear assignments and expectations, students are aided by seeing the criteria by which they will be evaluated prior to delivering the presentation. Here are two different types of grading forms; one type is detailed and the other is looser while also conveying general expectations.

I developed the first rubric, which is shown in Appendix A, by beginning with Stephen Lucas's evaluation form and then tailoring it to my needs. Over the years, I made the same "stock comments" many times over; therefore, I created a "key" to accompany the form. Evaluators can place checks beside items on the form that students accomplish well and numbers beside areas that need improvement. For example, placing a number 1 next to the "Central Idea" item would indicate that the student should refer to #1 on the key, which says "Clarify the central idea (topic and direction)."

The second type of grading form, which is included in Appendix B, is one that I use in Western Culture classes to evaluate student presentations. Since we do not spend much time in these survey courses learning the fundamentals of speech, I use a looser format on the grading sheet that allows me to comment qualitatively on broad issues of content and communication.

Conclusion

Incorporating student presentations in the college classroom helps students develop the ability to communicate both within the classroom and in the outside world. Presentations provide a sense of belonging, which enhances the motivation to learn. Presentations encourage students to have a mature outlook about their role in the classroom, and they present students with the opportunity to learn an art that will improve their lives outside of the classroom.

I hope that the types of presentations described here will be useful in a range of courses, and I would welcome hearing about how other faculty members have incorporated presentations into their classes. You may choose to use the grading forms as they are presented here or tailor them to your own needs.

To see speaking as the source of most of our blessings, as Isocrates did, may seem old-fashioned in today's fast-paced and plugged-in world. However, as long as humans live and work together, in families, schools, neighborhoods, and government, there will be a place for face-to-face communication.

Incorporating presentations in a range of college classrooms will help students learn this art, which will serve them throughout their lives.

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Appendix A

Name _____

Presentation Evaluation Sheet

Introduction:

___ Central Idea/Enumerated Preview

Body:

___ Main Points Clear and Distinct

___ Appropriate Supporting Materials

___ Citation

___ Transitions

___ Organizational Pattern

Conclusion:

___ Signaled Conclusion

___ Reinforced/Summarized Central Idea

Delivery:

___ Eye Contact

___ Rate

___ Volume

___ Gestures

___ Facial Expression

___ Vocal Variety

___ Posture

Style:

___ Language is clear, accurate, appropriate, and vivid

General:

___ Visual Aid

___ Finished within Time Limit

___ Adapted to Audience throughout Presentation

___ Outline Construction

___ Works Cited page

What strengths did the speaker demonstrate? _____

What are some areas for improvement? _____

GRADE: _____

Presentation Evaluation Key

Introduction:

1. Clarify the central idea (topic and direction).
2. Preview the main points in the order in which you will discuss them.

Body:

3. Clarify the organizational pattern.
4. There are too few/too many main points.
5. Connect the main points more clearly to the central idea/theme.
6. Use additional supporting materials to support the assertions.
7. Use a variety of research materials: books, newspaper articles, scholarly articles, websites.
8. Cite sources consistently/thoroughly to build credibility.
9. Work toward stronger transitions.
10. Anticipate counter arguments more convincingly.
11. Your reasoning is fallacious.

Conclusion:

12. Signal the conclusion.
13. Make the central idea/theme more memorable through reinforcement/summary.
14. Avoid “that’s it” ending.
15. Avoid including new information in the conclusion.

Delivery:

16. Break with notes to enhance eye contact.
17. Slow/increase/vary the rate.
18. Increase/decrease/vary the volume.
19. Gesture fully/Uncross arms/Take hands out of pockets.
20. Remove hat.

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21. Use more facial expression to engage the audience.
 22. Use non-verbal communication to create a more dynamic delivery.
 23. Avoid fidgeting.
 24. Pronunciation:
 25. Articulation:
 26. Colloquial language:
 27. Keep feet still/uncross legs.
 28. Stand up straight.

Visual Aid:

29. Explain the meaning/significance of the visual aid.
30. The visual aid is difficult to see.
31. Use light text on a dark background on the slides.
32. The slides are cluttered.
33. Other issues regarding visual aids:

General:

34. The topic may be too narrow/broad for the time limit.
35. The topic is inappropriate.
36. Work toward establishing the significance of the topic.
37. Adapt to the audience throughout the speech; use strategies that relate clearly to their needs.
38. Flesh out the outline/use full sentences where required/label topic & organizational pattern at top of page. Label parts of the speech. Use proper Roman numeral format for outline.
39. Consult a stylebook regarding proper format for Works Cited page.
40. Use at least 8 sources on Works Cited page.
41. Aim for greater variety among your sources. Wikipedia is not a scholarly source.

Appendix B

HUM 201 – Presentation

NAME _____

Depth of Discussion and Content (50 points): _____

Written Work and Visual Aids (25 points): _____

Delivery (25 points): _____

POINTS TOTAL: _____ GRADE: _____