

Teaching Oral Presentation Skills in First-Year Writing Courses

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Context and History

According to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences here at Virginia Tech, our alumni say there are two kinds of oral abilities college students need far more instruction and practice in before they graduate. The first of these skills is the ability to listen carefully to an ongoing conversation and add to that dialogue in a cogent, meaningful, and appropriate way when called upon to do so. This particular oral ability is one that has long been fostered in the typical first-year writing classroom, of course, through our widespread use of class discussion as a teaching method (see our previous contribution on this topic at [URL](#)), peer editing groups, conference teaching, and the like. The second of these skills, however, the ability to make an oral presentation, to deliver content to an audience in a one-way flow of information from speaker to hearers, is no longer typically associated with writing courses, but with public speaking courses.

This separation of oral and written composition into separate courses of study is a fairly recent historical development. From the 5th century B. C. E. in Athens through the 19th century in America, oral and written composition were taught side by side, synergistically, as students studied the art of rhetoric. But as S. Michael Halloran has argued (see **A Short History of Writing Instruction**, ed. James J. Murphy, Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1990), a variety of cultural forces -- literary, pedagogical, political, economic, and technological -- converged in the 19th century to transform the undergraduate course in neoclassical rhetoric into "English composition." The resulting schism between instruction in oral and written composition widened quickly and speech communication faculty left the professional associations

of English teachers early in the 20th century (whether they "walked out" or were "thrown out" of these associations very much depends on who you ask). In the time since, speech communication has become a fully developed scholarly discipline of its own, of course, with its own professional associations, journals, conventions, and departments. One indication of how great a rift exists between oral and written communication in higher education is that while Communication Studies, a social science, is the primary teacher of public speaking courses, English, a quintessential humanities discipline, remains the primary teacher of writing courses.

But that gap has begun to close -- and rapidly, too. Last fall, **The Chronicle of Higher Education** caused quite a stir when it ran a story on the need for Speaking Across the Curriculum courses. In the subsequent online discussion of the issues involved, there were some who opined that only speech communication professionals could effectively teach public speaking at the college-level and, thus, only they should be allowed to. But much as WAC and WID courses have institutionalized the idea that good writing is everyone's business, so, too, it seems, are college administrators coming to believe that good oral abilities are everyone's business as well. Hence, the teaching of oral presentation skills, per se, has begun to come back to first-year writing courses.

Dealing with Public Speaking Anxiety

Given their common origin in rhetoric, it is hardly surprising that most of what we teach as instructors of written composition has clear and strong parallels in the teaching of oral composition (invention, focus, unity, argument, development, organization, coherence, grammar, and style, to name just a few). But there are some glaring differences as well, the most obvious, of course, being that oral presentations are performed in front of a live audience. The anxiety that this situation can induce in the speaker is real, no doubt, but it has also become the stuff of urban legend. It is a well-known "fact," for instance, that Gallup polls show that Americans fear speaking in public more than they fear death. At my school, we have heard third-hand but "absolutely true" tales of students who have burst into tears, fainted, and even vomited during their oral presentations. Indeed, a English department colleague of ours swears she heard of a student who was so stressed out before his oral presentation in an Engineering class that the tension in his neck muscles fractured his own skull. We hasten to say, however, that in our

several years of teaching oral presentation skills to actual first-year writing students, we haven't seen anything that even remotely approaches this kind of difficulty. Yes, the students are nervous; yes, they also come through their experiences just fine -- given the right kind and amount of preparation. In other words, just as we can and do help students work through their writing anxiety, we can also help them work through their public speaking anxiety by addressing the issue directly, demystifying it, and suggesting ways of responding to it and alleviating it.

We can explain to students that their physiological responses to speaking anxiety are normal and natural reactions to the release of adrenaline and that **everyone** experiences them. Moreover, this heightened physical state is the exact same one that athletes seek out before they compete. We need not fear being this "pumped up," then, but rather can use it to our advantage. We can remind them that rather than being some hostile mob, the audience is actually made up of people just like them, that the audience actually wants to like them, wants them to succeed, and assumes that the speaker is an interesting person with important information to share. We can point out to them their presentations are not about **them** but about their content. They, personally, are not the center of attention, but rather their ideas are. If they are truly interested in communicating, then both their and their audience's attention will be focused on what they say, not how they say it, will be focused on their messages rather than on their performances. Finally, we can remind students that they already know effective and healthy ways of dealing with stress through deep breathing, stretching exercises, self-massage, and the like. In short, in teaching students how to compose oral texts, we are also teaching them how to **compose themselves** emotionally and compose themselves as public speakers.

Sequences and Expectations

Given their anxiety, it is likewise good practice to ease students into oral presentations gradually. Our sequences of speaking experiences can build slowly and carefully toward the kinds of abilities we want students to have when they leave our courses. Sequences can move students from

- rather informal and ungraded presentations to more formal and carefully evaluated ones;
- from group presentations, to paired presentations, to individual presentations;
- from presentations made while sitting at one's desk, to

- presentations made while standing at one's desk, to
- presentations made standing at the front of the room;
- from using scripts, to using notecards, to using no notes whatsoever.

Similarly, our sequences should be characterized by reasonable objectives, by reachable standards for all students that practically guarantee their success. Indeed, we can ask students to help in defining these goals:

"In a paragraph, explain what elements of oral presentation you need to work on throughout the semester. What do you need to feel successful and comfortable speaking in front of the classroom or in other public atmospheres?"

Using students' input as a basis, we can set the tone for our collective efforts and clearly articulate our expectations at the outset of our courses, using a one-page handout like the following, for instance:

Basic Criteria and Tips for Effective Oral Presentations

One of the goals of this course is to offer you instruction and practice in the fundamentals of making effective oral presentations. This is not, however, a course in public speaking. There will be no formal speeches and no major presentations. Your experiences in making oral presentations will be minor and informal, but frequent, so that you may become more comfortable with this activity. Presenting your ideas orally is difficult for most people, but an absolute necessity for full participation and success in the university, the world of work, and the participatory democracy in which we live.

Let's be honest about this: Learning to make effective oral presentations is like learning to ride a bicycle. You could read books about riding a bike forever, but until you actually get on one and crash once or twice, skinning your knees, you won't ever really learn to do it. You are not expected to do this perfectly. You are expected to do your best, to support your classmates, and to learn from both your efforts and theirs.

Let's keep it simple, then:

1. Focus on **what** you are saying and not on **how** you are saying it. Your content -- your ideas and your belief in your ideas -- is far more important than your delivery of that content. Confidence comes from competence, from your command of your material.

2. Project your voice. Speak loudly enough, slowly enough, clearly enough, and with enough modulation in your voice to be heard and understood without difficulty by everyone in the room.

3. Involve members of your audience in your presentation. Engage them with eye contact.

4. Adopt a purposeful stance and use natural, meaningful gestures as you speak.

Adapting What Works in Our Writing Instruction

Our teaching of oral composition can and should adapt and utilize whatever pedagogical techniques work in our teaching of written composition. For example, if we use examples and models in our teaching of writing to concretely demonstrate what good writing looks like, we can and should employ examples and models in our teaching of public speaking as well. We can provide those models ourselves, fulfilling our own speaking assignments, or, better yet, prevail upon former students to come to class and offer examples of how to present effectively. Seeing their peers succeed helps students understand that they, too, can make effective oral presentations.

Likewise, if we regularly employ peer critique in our writing workshops, we can and should use the same technique in our teaching of oral presentation skills. Students can be provided with checksheets of the grading criteria being used and be required to evaluate the performances of their classmates as part of their class participation. Just as in our writing workshops, peer critique directs students' attention to particular aspects of the task and allows them to learn both what works well and what not to do when their turn comes.

Similarly, if we like to specify clearly articulated formats to

help students structure their written compositions, we can provide explicit formats for their oral compositions as well. One such format, for instance, the **PREP** format for impromptu speaking, works much like the five-paragraph theme, providing a failsafe (though perhaps predictable) way of organizing information for the audience:

I. State **Point of View** -- provide direct statement of position on the topic at hand

II. State **Reasons Why** -- provide broad reasons why you hold this point of view

III. Present **Evidence and Examples** -- provide data to support the stated point of view and reasons

IV. Restate **Point of View**

A Pair of Don'ts

As we move toward the end of this overview, let us suggest two things that you should **not** do in your teaching of fundamental oral presentation skills.

First, do not have an oral presentation "unit" in which oral composition is separated out from the rest of the course as a distinct object of study. Synthesize it with the rest of the course; fold it in with all the other kinds of instruction you offer over the course of the entire semester, integrating it with instruction you offer in writing skills, research skills, internet skills, and so on. If nothing else, be sure to avoid scheduling a week or two of class time for back to back oral presentations. Few students or teachers can consistently focus their attention for that length of time.

Second, do not emphasize the use of visual aids in the making of oral presentations. The production of such visual aids allows students to stay focused on the creation of a kind of written composition when they should really be concentrating on their oral skills. Likewise, such visual aids distract both the speaker and the audience from the speaker's content and direct it toward an artifact; students who use visual aids typically spend far too much time with their backs to the audience as they, too, look at their visual aids. Finally, the technology available for visual aids today clearly privileges flash and glitz over substance.

Students who use presentation software, such as Microsoft PowerPoint, for instance, typically spend entirely too much time futzing with minutiae of its appearance: changing the fonts and sizes and colors of their onscreen text, importing clip art and photos and soundtracks and even video clips, manufacturing elaborate visual transitions (fade to black, fly in from left, and so on) both within slides and from one slide to the next, and so on. In sum, the time we and our students can afford to spend on the fundamentals of oral composition in our writing courses is rather precious. Be careful not to squander it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the teaching of oral presentation skills might seem to be an imposition of an outside agenda onto first-year writing courses, it might more profitably be seen as going "back to the future." Since internet technologies will soon solve the bandwidth issues that are now holding back the widespread use of web-based telephony and video conferencing, we might do well to once again embrace our ancient rhetorical and pedagogical roots to teach speaking and writing side-by-side and hand-in-hand.