

Incorporating Oral Communication into the Writing Class

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For the past three decades, communication across the curriculum (CXC) programs have been called upon to provide support for teaching oral communication practices in non-communication classrooms. Yet many faculty and instructors teaching writing courses (and other courses for that manner) have minimal information on this movement. In the next few paragraphs, my goal is to open the discussion about incorporating speaking into writing courses by proposing five research-based principles we know about speaking and subsequent recommendations for instructional design based on those principles. I designed this information at a very general level—for faculty just starting to consider oral communication within the composition context. Following this information, though, I've included some questions and issues for consideration –with the goals of generating discussion from faculty who have varied levels of expertise.

First, students are more likely to take speaking activities seriously if they are designed to enhance and support disciplinary content. Therefore, incorporate speaking assignments that support your instructional goals. Do not make it your goal to provide students with comprehensive instruction on oral communication (that is the job of faculty and instructors in communication departments). Rather, consider adding speaking in a way that furthers and supports your goals as a teacher of composition.

Questions for discussion:

- How might speaking activities fit best in your composition course? What course goals do you think might be enhanced with the incorporation of speaking? In what ways could speaking activities support your focus on writing?
- What reservations come to mind when you consider incorporating speaking in your writing course? Given the students who typically take your course, what are the primary challenges they would face?

Second, students will be afraid to speak (in fact, one of the most researched areas in the field of communication is communication anxiety!). Therefore, incorporate multiple, varied (low-stakes) opportunities for speaking in your composition course. Research tells us that the more students speak, the less anxious

they are about upcoming communication events. As you design speaking activities, here are three general guidelines focused on addressing student anxiety: 1) Construct several (weekly) informal assignments that allow students to practice their speaking skills. Formats for these speaking-to-learn assignments include pair and share, group discussion leadership, impromptu presentations, debates, or group teaching presentations. 2) Keep formal speaking assignments to a minimum in your composition course (2 at most) and tie them to writing assignments, and 3) Give students plenty of opportunities to practice for formal speaking assignments. Possibilities include creating peer review groups for speaking, having students exchange speech outlines, or asking students to do informal introductions in front of a small group that they then improve for a final presentation.

Questions for discussion:

- How easily could you incorporate informal speaking exercises in your current course? What challenges might you face (time, coverage of content, etc.)?
- What about holding students accountable for informal speaking activities? In what ways could you make this manageable given your focus on the writing process?

Third, speaking competence is much more about preparation than performance. Therefore, consider designing activities that teach students to strategically approach and plan for speaking events. Many faculty I work with across campuses place a heavy emphasis on delivery skills—reducing the “ums” and “uhs” and eliminating nervous gestures. This is an important part of speaking competence yet it should not be the sole focus of speaking instruction (just as grammar is an important part of writing but not the sole focus of writing instruction). Instead of focusing completely on delivery, encourage students to think about preparing for speaking events by addressing issues of audience, ethics, and enhancing credibility.

Questions for discussion:

- What kinds of activities could you use to help students focus on preparing well before speaking events—not just performing well during them?
- How might you use what you know writing process pedagogy to teach students to prepare for speaking assignments? Could any of the principles for teaching students preparatory writing strategies apply to speaking?

Fourth, speaking is an embodied event. Therefore, oral feedback is not only appropriate, but also crucial in speaking instruction. Every time a student speaks in a public setting (even if it is in front of a small group in semi-formal activities) there are

physiological responses (heart rate increase, sweating, etc.). Therefore, for semi formal or formal speaking assignments, it is important to give students supportive oral feedback in addition to the written feedback that may come later in the form of a grade. This oral feedback will allow students to build confidence in their speaking abilities and reduce some of the factors causing anxiety (fear of failure, fear of looking silly). If you are mostly doing informal speaking assignments, still provide oral feedback to these activities but focus that feedback on the students' learning of the content—and the ways in which their communication illustrated that learning.

Questions for discussion:

- How might you balance the need to provide supportive feedback with your desire to help students improve speaking competence? What if a student does poorly in a speaking assignment? How would you address them orally in this situation?
- Do you see it as your role to help students build confidence in their speaking abilities? If so, what strategies might you use to do this?

Fifth, observation and reflection on speaking events help students improve speaking skills. Therefore, design evaluation techniques that allow students to observe and reflect on their own and their peers' speaking. Many composition faculty I work with have a discussion grade that includes one informal speaking assignment per week. Other faculty ask students to do a quick self-evaluation of their participation in informal speaking assignments (using a speaking-to-learn grading guide) and then those self evaluations count towards a participation grade. For formal speaking assignments, construct a rubric (similar to your rubrics for formal writing assignments) and have students use that rubric to evaluate their peers and themselves. If you have resources, you might even consider videotaping students and asking them to evaluate their tape.

Questions for discussion:

- What challenges do you face when evaluating students' speaking abilities? How might you manage these challenges within your writing course?
- How do you expect your students will respond if you try peer review or self-evaluation of speaking? What kinds of skills would they need to learn in order to provide good, useful reflection?

Finally, as you consider incorporating speaking in your writing courses, know there are resources out there to support your work. Do not hesitate to ask questions, seek out information, pose challenges, or provide any resources or expertise you might have to

this growing issue. If you would like additional information on the oral communication across the curriculum movement, the following link to the National Communication Association website should provide a starting point.

<http://www.natcom.org/Instruction/summerconf/cxc.htm>

[Additional Resources](#)

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