



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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No More Singin' the Blues: Preparing for Oral Presentations

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Too many instructors have related the experience of students who are deeply engaged in research projects during the semester, but who then stumble painfully when presenting their work orally to the class. The same students who have animatedly pursued capstone projects that, in written form, reflect a mature grasp of concepts central to the discipline may come across as inauthentic pretenders when faced with the "stand and deliver" challenge of the oral presentation and discussion of their work.

Knowing that oracy¹ is a hallmark of an educated person as well as a valuable life and professional skill, faculty want to develop students' presentation skills but struggle with how to fit that into the curriculum without sacrificing course content. I offer the suggestion below as a time-efficient approach to building students' confidence and competence as speakers. In addition, I invite instructors who have experienced success with this or other strategies to share them with me for posting on the TRC website.

Well in advance of the dreaded "oral reports," it's helpful to address the issue of effective speaking directly in class. Prior to that discussion you might have students read a short article that stimulates thinking about public speaking. Ideally the piece would relate in some way to course content, such as the following example articles:

- Formal Oral Presentation, *Handbook for Speakers*. 2006. Washington, DC: American Chemical Society.²
- Hurrelbrinck, Nancy. 1996. Subtle Sexism (Still) Chilling the Climate for Women in the Classroom, *Inside UVA*, 1 November.³

An in-class discussion of the trigger article can generate a list of specifics students identify as important in oral communication. Likely to arise in their considerations:

- *Can the speaker be seen?*
- *Can the speaker be heard? Does the voice reach everyone in the room?*
- *Is the rate of speech conducive to understanding, or too rapid?*
- *Does the speaker seem connected to the talk? Does s/he seem confident, energized? Or, is there a high degree of anxiety evident?*

From that discussion, compile and distribute the students' list of the essential elements for effective communication. Likely they will have identified volume, eye contact, rate, posture, and a few additional items.

Then (and this is key!), implement a system or assignment which pairs students for the purpose of working with each other before presenting in class. In a practice session, each should hear the other's talk and give feedback and specific suggestions for improvement. If you require an account (a paragraph or two) of what was done and the ideas that arose, written independently by each student and turned in on or before the day of the oral presentation, you will ensure that the rehearsal is held; you will also find that it yields many ideas you can collect and give to the whole class as a take-away product. Once several of these accounts are handed in, you can compile and distribute the best ideas. Typical discoveries that can be shared may include remarks such as:

- *We practiced outdoors (in a garden, in the Amphitheater) because we wanted to develop adequate volume. As a byproduct, we learned how to concentrate through a lot of distractions.*
- *She suggested I make eye contact first with those sitting farthest away.*

- *He told me I didn't appear as nervous as I felt.*
- *I re-wrote my talk because my partner wasn't able to follow it.*
- *We read each other's talks aloud. Listening to what I had written spoken by someone else gave me a lot of ideas for fine tuning.*

Staggering the oral reports over a period of weeks rather than packing them all into very few class sessions will result in better learning because it allows more time for students to consider and develop both content and presentation. Helpful competition may kick in as students wait to see which ideas from rehearsal accounts the instructor deems worthy of dissemination.

Why make the effort to adjust class procedure as suggested above? To spare everyone a round of de-energized, uncommitted and unconvincing oral reports! Demystifying the expectations surrounding oral presentation and providing a method to practice often unlocks creativity and confidence and allows students to own and voice what they've learned. Again, I invite you to let me know the effects on students' performance you note when using this or other approaches to building speaking competency.

¹ Oracy, the ability to be fluent with words, also suggests a connection to literacy (from Patsy Rodenburg, *The Need for Words* [Routledge, 2001]: 9).

² <http://www.chemistry.org/portal/a/c/s/1/acdisplay.html?DOC=meetingshandbook.html#formal> (accessed August 15, 2006).

³ <http://www.virginia.edu/insideuva/textonlyarchive/96-11-01/6.txt> (accessed August 15, 2006).