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Learning to Speak and Speaking to Learn

Gary Smith

Most students graduate from college having had no instruction or practice in public speaking, and, indeed, many harbor a dread of speaking to an audience. When asked five or ten years after graduation what they wished they had learned in college, they answer that to speak effectively and without fear is generally near the top of the list.

The use of speaking assignments across the curriculum beginning in the first year of college not only develops the ability to speak coherently and persuasively, but also helps students learn course content. For these reasons, Pomona College's general education program requires all students to take at least one speaking-intensive course. My experience in teaching such courses has been overwhelmingly positive. Students learn the material better, and they learn to speak more effectively. They are well aware of these benefits and are thankful for the opportunity to take speaking-intensive courses.

Why

Professors often remark that although they earned good grades as students, they never understood the material fully until they began lecturing on it. There are at least two explanations for this.

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First is the energizing fear of the acute embarrassment that will result from an inaccurate, disorganized, or incoherent oral presentation. This vulnerability provides tremendous motivation to prepare adequately. It is one thing to know the material well enough as a student to supply acceptable answers to specific questions on an examination; it is quite another to know the material well enough to lecture on it. As students, we could keep our answers brief and write vaguely about concepts that were not yet clear to us. As professors, we need to be able to explain the material in a variety of ways, and we must be prepared to answer probing questions.

As students taking multiple-choice tests, we could guess at some answers and be rewarded if we got more than 90 percent right. As professors, we are not shown a list of possible answers, should not be satisfied with guesses, and should not be pleased if 5 or 10 percent of what we tell students is wrong. To give an effective, accurate lecture, we need to know the material.

Another reason why we understand a subject better after we lecture on it is that we learn by doing. The virtues of active-learning strategies are widely acknowledged. We understand concepts better and retain them longer when we express these concepts in our own words. Writing assignments are one way to do this. Speaking assignments are another.

We have all had moments of insight when we try to explain a subtle or complex point. As our mind works hard to formulate a persuasive explanation, we suddenly recognize a new analogy, a different argument, a fresh interconnection. There is an intimate relationship between logical reasoning and effective speaking. Good logic not only underlies clear speaking, but can be shaped by it.

To fulfill their general education requirements, each Pomona College student must pass at least one course that has been approved as speaking-intensive. There are no traditional public-speaking courses at Pomona. Just as writing need not be confined to English courses, so we encourage speaking across the curriculum.

Guidelines

The curriculum committee recommends that several principles be followed in designing speaking-intensive courses to help students develop the ability to speak clearly, logically, and persuasively.

1. Students should receive some instruction on the principles and practice of effective speaking. This might consist of a few general guidelines, or it might be a detailed list of do's and don'ts. I tell students that we are all prone to nervous habits (fiddling with a button, putting a hand in a pocket, saying "um") that distract listeners and signal the speaker's nervousness. Speakers are usually unaware of these habits, and one of our jobs as a supportive audience is to alert them

to these problems. I also tell students that audiences have more confidence in speakers who don't rely much on notes; someone who reads a speech may be just reciting what someone else wrote. A memorized speech can have the same dull effect.

Our goal is to give an extemporaneous speech that demonstrates that the speaker knows the material and is expressing it in his or her own words. I also advise students to have lots of eye contact with individual members of the audience, instead of looking at notes, the floor, or the back of the room. I mention that there is disagreement about the effect of speakers' mobility. Some experts say that a speaker should stand in one place and move about as little as possible; others believe that the energy conveyed by movement enlivens the effect.

2. Students should be given enough notice to prepare for their speaking assignments beforehand. Although memorizing is strongly discouraged, students should be encouraged to learn the material and to practice before a friend or a mirror.

3. Students should express their own thoughts, not read or recite speeches, poems, plays, or songs. Our courses are intended to help students learn substantive material—not memorize lines—and to state ideas and arguments in their own words.

4. The student must be in the spotlight. Student participation in classroom discussion is not sufficient to qualify a course as speaking-intensive. Each student should be a primary speaker—for example, by giving a classroom presentation or leading a focused discussion. If a student can sit passively and merely comment occasionally, the energizing fear of embarrassment is absent, and so is the chance to develop effective public-speaking skills.

5. The students should receive specific suggestions shortly afterward (through written comments, conferences with the instructor, or peer evaluations) on how they can present their arguments more effectively. Just as the development of good writing skills requires useful feedback, so do good speaking skills. At the end of each speech, I give the class a few minutes to write down constructive suggestions. I collect these and give them to the speaker at the end of class. If everyone says "slow down" or "speak up," the speaker will know this is a serious problem. This exercise also encourages everyone to think about what works and what doesn't. I also make written suggestions. One enlightening practice is to write especially popular phrases (such as *um* and *basically*) at the top of the page and tabulate how many times these are used by the student.

6. After receiving this feedback, students should have opportunities to improve their speaking. Obviously, one cannot become an effective speaker by giving one speech. Similarly, just as one writing-intensive course is not sufficient to make a good writer, so one speaking-course is not enough. Instead, courses should be viewed as opportunities to nurture and develop skills that will be honed over a lifetime. In practice, the curriculum committee has approved courses with as few as two speaking opportunities per student.

7. A speaking-intensive course normally should have no more than twenty students; otherwise, there may not be enough time for all students to have many speaking opportunities. I have taught speaking-intensive classes with more than thirty students, but there was adequate time because of an emphasis on work outside the classroom rather than lectures.

8. Courses in languages other than English may be approved as speaking-intensive. The use of a foreign language does not preclude students learning by speaking and learning to speak persuasively and without fear.

Reality Check

I have learned much from my experience with two quite different courses that emphasize both writing and speaking: an interdisciplinary statistics class and a finance class for economics majors. In each class, I divide the students into three-person teams. If the enrollment is not divisible by three, I make one or two four-person teams.

In the statistics course, each team is assigned nine projects (twelve if the team has four members) to do over the course of the semester, each with a specific due date. Here are two sample projects; the first involves published data; the second requires a survey:

> 1. What has happened to the age and gender of the U.S. work force since the 1950s?
>
> 2. Do Pomona College male students tend to overestimate or underestimate their weight? What about female students?

The team members work together to collect and analyze the data, with one student writing an essay and one giving a speech. Normally, the student who writes the essay also makes the speech, but this is not required. During the semester, each student makes three project presentations. In addition, each student writes a statistics term paper and presents it orally.

In the finance class, the teams have to manage competing financial intermediaries and prepare weekly memos justifying their decisions. The results are determined by a computer simulation program I wrote that is based on a secret historical period in an unnamed country, with each week in the course corresponding to three months of real time. The country and time period are revealed and discussed at the end of the course (and must consequently be changed each time the course is taught). The teams use spreadsheets or write their own computer programs to assist their decisions.

The weekly memos not only explain the teams' decisions, but also answer a set of questions intended to focus the students' attention on relevant information. These questions are assigned a week in advance and depend on the historical period and the performance of the teams. Here, for example, is one set of questions used in the spring of 1996:

> 1. According to the expectations hypothesis, what is the anticipated value of the 3-month Treasury bill rate next quarter?
>
> 2. Why might the term structure rotate, as it did this past quarter?
>
> 3. Give a rational explanation for why Imprudential, which offered the highest savings-account rate, has the second lowest level of savings deposits.

The team members work together outside class to make the weekly decisions and answer my questions, with one student writing that week's memo. Half the teams

have one student speak to present the team's answers to my questions. Each student makes at least two speeches during the semester and, in addition, each team makes a group presentation at the end of the semester that recaps their performance.

One challenge in designing a speaking-intensive course is to keep the entire class actively engaged in the weekly activities outside the classroom, even though only a small number will be giving oral presentations at any given class. The use of teams seems an effective strategy that also develops teamworking skills and builds camaraderie.

One issue I have wrestled with is whether each week's oral presentations should be on the same topic. The first time that I taught my statistics class as speaking intensive, I assigned all teams the same topic each week so that the students might benefit from comparing their approaches and results. But if more than two or three people speak on the same subject, the presentations become repetitive and the class becomes bored. After a few weeks, I began assigning each team a different topic. In my finance class, I now ask half the teams one set of questions and half another set, and have only half of each group make speeches.

Because the ability to think on one's feet is an important objective, I tell students to ask each speaker challenging questions. If the questions lag, I fire away. Even "dumb" questions can be useful, as they force the speaker to explain things differently and perhaps more clearly. Students find spirited exchanges among the speaker and various audience members to be not only beneficial, but a great deal of fun. I have also noticed that students tend to ask tougher questions of the more accomplished or arrogant speakers and to take it easy on those who are struggling.

In each of these courses, the oral presentations take up a lot of class time (from thirty to sixty minutes each week), and much of the course work is done outside the classroom—in the statistics course, reading the textbook and gathering and analyzing data; in the finance course, analyzing the weekly results and making decisions. This has been a dramatic change from my accustomed role of giving lectures and answering scattered questions.

What I have come to realize is that the focus of the course should not be on me, but on helping students learn the subject matter and develop intellectual skills that will serve them well throughout their lives. For both of these goals, I am now convinced that students can learn more by speaking than by listening.