# ❄ INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

## Speaking Collaboratively: A Group Method of Teaching Public Speaking

*"I don't remember a thing I said up there. All I kept thinking was, 'Please, God, let this be over soon.'"*

Sentiments such as this are common among beginning public speaking students. Research on public speaking tells us that communication apprehension is one of the greatest fears students experience.

The following course design is offered as one strategy for combatting this anxiety. By 1) providing a collaborative, pre-speaking foundation and 2) utilizing the speaking workshop cycles, the design increases student learning and creates a community of speakers who leave the class feeling positive toward public speaking.

### The Foundation

Even though we may relate to and understand student speaking apprehension, some methods of teaching beginning public speaking can make the situation worse. Students in public speaking classes are often taught to speak by individually picking a topic, individually preparing and organizing the speech, individually rehearsing the presentation, individually delivering the speech, and finally, collectively receiving criticism. This individual focus on performance and group focus on criticism tends to generate greater uncertainty, apprehension, and fear. No matter how constructive the criticism is in these situations, the average student becomes defensive and withdrawn.

Using groups to facilitate speech organization, preparation, and feedback is invaluable. Group work relieves much of the pre-speech stress and lessens the post-speech defensiveness. The group processes build the support system necessary to help students relax and try. When this collaboration is combined with the front-loading of material, a firm foundation is laid for the first speech.

To explain, prior to their first speaking experience, students participate in intensive pre-speaking workshops that review important communication principles and concepts essential to successful public speaking. Students begin with a positive self-concept workshop, then move to listening, nonverbal communication, group communication, and finally public speaking. They spend time on speech organization, purposes, and delivery. Additionally, all reading and testing are completed before the first speech.

Students also write think pieces, one-to-two page free-writes about an assigned communication topic. They might address self-concept, listening, or nonverbal communication. Before the first speech, students must write a piece that articulates their visualization of their speech. From getting up to sitting down, students describe their ideal first speech (e.g., audience reaction, speaker delivery, and usually the final grade). Each of these pass/fail assignments allows the instructor to provide individual feedback and encouragement to students as they approach the speaking process.

During this early-semester phase, group activities help students collectively learn how to generate attention-getters, phrase transitions, and handle questions. Other group activities include generating message skeletons (outlines) and learning how to message "map." Message "mapping" is a technique for preparing and evaluating speeches that tracks the speech, as the listener hears it, along a graphic "map." The path of the speech is visually displayed along a map of introduction, main idea, and conclusion blocks. In preparing the speech, this technique provides visual learners with a quick reference of the desired speech outcomes. In evaluation, the map provides evaluators with a holistic picture of the speech-listening experience.

In the practice groups, strong speakers and organizers help other less-accomplished students improve their skills. By observing the exercise groups, the instructor is better able to assess student learning and tailor instruction to student needs. In short, these processes help students understand what is expected and reduce the uncertainty surrounding grading criteria. Initially, there is some student resistance; however, by the end of the semester most students comment on how glad they were they went through this process before making the first speech. From this foundation, the students can successfully build their communication skills through the speaking workshops.

### The Speaking Workshops

During the speaking workshops phase, the class is either in preparation groups, delivering speeches, or in

feedback groups. The workshops include the following stages.

• The initial phase involves assigning the speech and forming first-round feedback groups. The students refer to the detailed assignment sheet that outlines the major areas of focus for the first speech (typically an information speech) included in their course packet. Each component area—topic, outline, message management, message substance, and performance skill—is described with detailed expectations and suggestions. Students are told weeks in advance of these processes and advised to pick a topic and begin their research. After reviewing all the criteria, the instructor posts feedback groups (randomly assigned groups of five or six); and the students meet to discuss possible topics, clarify concerns, and start working on outlines.

• Students review each other's topic choices and help build message outlines. Typically, the groups also meet outside of class to further this process. Each group is asked to share one outline, and the class discusses its design.

• Each student delivers a speech to the class while each member of his or her feedback group creates a map of the presentation, recording content and delivery comments. The instructor also "maps" the speech as it is given and makes comments to facilitate grading. After the last speaker, post-speaking feedback groups meet.

• In the post-speech class session, the groups move through a formal feedback group agenda. A group leader is chosen to direct the flow of the exercise as the group gives feedback to each speaker. Group members are urged to be constructive and honest in their feedback. One speaker at a time listens to what the group members believed were the purpose and main ideas. The group also comments on content, organization, and delivery of the speech.

One important aspect of this feedback process is that the speaker is not allowed to "clarify" (i.e., tell members of the audience what they were supposed to hear), only to ask questions about what the group heard—or what was communicated. The speaker listens and records the group's comments. After a person receives an evaluation, he or she collects the "maps" from the other group members, and the group moves on. During this time the instructor works the room, facilitating the discussion in each group. After each student has received group feedback, he/she also receives the instructor's map and evaluation.

• Now each student takes the feedback group outlines and comments, and the instructor evaluation, and writes about the speaking experience. The speaking piece is a free-write aimed at exploring the preparation, delivery, and feedback of a given speaking experience. Students write about the speaking experience and develop specific goals for the next speech. This assignment is turned in during the next class period.

• Students bring a great deal of thought to these papers—setting their own standards and goals for the next speech. An added benefit is that since the inception of this feedback process, there have been few complaints about grades. With the additional group feedback, students see that it was not only the instructor who missed a transition or did not catch a main idea.

• This process is repeated for each speech, with slightly different foci depending on the speech type (e.g., information, persuasion). A new feedback group is assigned for each speech, so students collaborate with all members of the class. (It is recommended that at least two high-ability speakers from the first round are in each feedback group.) The feedback groups become more sophisticated in the process of preparation and feedback, and the think pieces become more detailed. All in all, a collective energy drives each new speaking experience.

## Results

The colleagues who have utilized this course design, as well as the students who have participated in it, reinforce the use of the system. The collaborative foundation and speaking workshops facilitate a less intimidating and more encouraging mode of teaching public speaking. The most gratifying outcome is seeing students make friends, learn about communication, and associate positive feelings with an often frightening experience.

Speech teachers have a daunting task—persuading students to approach, learn, and enjoy public speaking. Collaborative methods of teaching might be the key to helping students master public speaking without calling on a "higher power" for a swift ending.

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