



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## Getting to Know Your Students: The "Success Speech"

Each semester my speech and communication class fills with students, apprehensive and insecure about the process of public speaking. Usually 70-80 percent never have taken a speech class and do not remember giving a report or speech in the last four years.

The ice-breaker speech can be deadly to those students. I have tried the standard "getting to know you" speech and found my students telling the same old story. They give little thought to the information about themselves; they fill the allotted time with their years in town, marital status, children, hobbies, and so on. The speakers were not particularly motivated, and the listeners became restless after a few speeches. All that initial speech seemed to accomplish was lowering further the student's self-perception of his/her speaking ability. Then I tried the "success speech."

Now after the introductory class session, I ask the students to bring in a symbol of a success in their lives and tell about it for approximately five minutes. I explain that the speech is not given a grade, nor is it critiqued. It simply will be a time of listening and enjoying. The students may talk of successes as early in life as they wish. I assure them it will not be a contest, just a sharing of something important in their lives; and I give them examples of other success speeches from the past.

In past speeches, classes have seen baseball gloves and heard stories of students' dreams coming true; a black belt and the journey getting there; pictures of children and spouses; cheerleading jackets; trophies; a sample of wall paper; report cards, high school diplomas; letters of appreciation; and letters of acceptance to college.

This assignment has become my favorite. We, as a class, are immediately touched by some of the obstacles that students have overcome in their lives. One student shared that his greatest success was graduating from high school. He realized that some people may not view that as much of a success, but as the first member of a large family to ever make it through high school, he recalled with pride the tears of his mother, father, and siblings as he walked up on stage to receive his diploma.

One of my students told of his past history as a gang member. He talked of a teacher that pulled him aside and told him he was destined to be somebody. His teacher's words had stuck; he left the gang, with great difficulty,

along with the alcohol, the drugs, and the crime. He was working hard to make this teacher's words come true.

One semester I had a basketball player in my class. He was about 6'10" tall. His name and picture appeared nearly every week in the sports section of the local newspaper. After the initial class meeting I viewed him as being rather cocky and a tad abrasive. I expected him to bring a trophy for his success speech. Instead, this young man stood before us telling about the greatest success in his life. He pulled out a wallet-sized photo of his mother and began to share with us her constant reassurances and prayers that her son would one day escape from the ghetto. After all, she reminded him, he was special; and she promised him he would succeed. He said all his publicity, his trophies, and the attention he received should go to his mother, for she had made it happen.

Many of my students remarked that the assignment was difficult but meaningful. They had to dig deep and ponder successes in their lives. One woman, named Rose, called to tell me she would be unable to give the speech. She explained, "I am not able to do the assignment. I have had no successes." I quickly reassured her and began giving her suggestions. "Have you been married?" I asked. "Yes," she replied, and that was definitely not a success. "Children?" I quickly responded. Again she replied, "Yes, but they were not a success." After several other questions, and still no successes, I suggested she talk to a friend and ask him/her to help her determine one of her successes.

The following week I immediately looked to see if her seat was empty. Fortunately, it was not. After all of the other speeches were completed, this woman quietly shared with the class that she had phoned and told me she could not give the speech. But, she said as she listened to the others talking about their successes, she realized that perhaps she had underestimated her accomplishments. She went on to tell us that as a high school dropout and a divorced mother with four children, she managed to find two low-paying jobs to support her family. She had just put a down payment on her first home. At 40 years of age, she had received her GED and was now beginning college. The students responded with thunderous applause. Their support continued for



the entire semester, as they sensed her need to be praised.

We give our students few opportunities to talk about the successes in their lives, and often in the college setting, we give students the perception that no one really cares. It amazes me that we can spend an entire semester together and never know that someone sitting next to us is vying for Miss Yuma County, has a black belt in karate, was valedictorian of his high school graduating class, was a past drug addict and overcame it, was spelling bee champion in 1992, or won first place in the state art contest.

After the assignment, we discuss that most successes in our lives have not come easy, but rather that they are

obstacles we have had to overcome. We ponder the fact that true success is not handed to us, but comes from working hard.

I recommend the "success speech" to any class. Not only does it give the students a quick boost of self-esteem, support from the other students, and practice speaking in front of a group, but it gets them focusing on success.

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## ***Encouraging Students to Start Their Personal Academic Libraries***

Almost every student who comes into my office comments on the number of books on my shelves. "Are they all yours?" "Have you read them all?" I explain that this is my personal academic library, that some books are 30 years old or older, and that most are used as reference books, saving a number of trips to the library.

To begin my own academic library, I kept all books from my undergraduate and graduate science courses and books I purchased from other students. In my first college teaching position, other teachers and textbook representatives gave me books. In my current position, I exchange with other science teachers.



During the second semester of the academic year, I ask all natural science majors enrolled in my lecture and/or lab to drop by the office. I begin our visit by telling them that I hope they plan to keep their science books when they finish their current courses and use them as references in others. Then I give them a text from the shelf to be used for starting their own academic library. The book is usually a second edition of a book that has gone to a third edition, and I try to match the book to the specific field of study each student wishes to pursue.

I have been giving books to natural science majors for three years. Only two of the approximately 25 students had already started a collection of science books. Smiles on faces were nice to see. Most students were a little shocked, but they all were thankful. In the second year, I received a letter from a former student who was taking a junior-level science course at another school. The course

did not have a textbook, but he was using the one I had given him to help in the transition and wanted me to know it had been a great help to him.

Encouraging students to keep their textbooks and giving them another should help get them started with their personal academic library. The students will appreciate your encouragement.

*Lloyd L. Willis, Associate Professor, Biology*

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*Suanne D. Roueche, Editor*

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