

## Problem-Based Learning and Basic Public Speaking: An Innovative Approach

### Fire and Brimstone

Several years ago, I assigned a mock debate assignment in my basic public speaking class: “Should the Ten Commandments Remain Posted in Schools and Other Public Institutions?” As I made the assignment, I explained that some students might find themselves on the opposing side of their own moral compass and way of thinking. I noted that it was just a classroom exercise, and that there was no reason to believe that such an assignment would somehow damage their personal convictions and value system.

After assigning teams for the activity, I had one student leave the classroom visibly upset. She asked if she could speak to me privately. During this private conversation she explained that due to her religious convictions, she simply could not argue in favor of removing the Ten Commandments from display in public institutions. Again, I explained that it was a classroom exercise. In particular, I explained that it was important to understand both sides of an argument, and that in fact, understanding an opponent’s position enables one to build a stronger counterargument. Nonetheless, she refused to participate and indicated that she would have to discuss this situation with her pastor.

The next week we began the debate, and in keeping with her initial decision, the conflicted student chose not to participate. Further, she explained that if I continued with this exercise and asked students to speak against their personal moral and religious convictions, I might meet—as she put it—an unpleasant and fiery demise.

This was not the first time I had encountered the issue of students baulking at an assignment based on religious conviction and finding it difficult to create an evidence-based persuasive argument that went beyond personal opinion and religious conviction. It was the first time, however, a student had ever suggested that if I continued, I might find myself at some level of Dante’s *Inferno* in the afterlife!

What I had encountered was a classic example of a student stuck in the “dualistic” stage of intellectual and ethical development—stage one of the cognitive developmental model that William Perry identified in his groundbreaking study, *Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development*. In that work Perry identifies four predictable stages of intellectual and moral development:

dualism, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. The first, dualism, is the stage where students look to persons of authority to provide “right” answers and the proper way to value and understand ideas. Dualists believe there is one right answer and are unable to recognize conflicting versions of “the truth.” In a conservative western Kentucky coal mining region (where my institution is located), one can readily understand how such a “one right answer” point of view could be shaped by family, pastor, and community.

I shared with a colleague my frustrations regarding this dualistic way of thinking and the problems it was presenting in my basic public speaking course, particularly as it related to the persuasive speech assignment. Not surprisingly, I found my colleague was equally frustrated and encountering a similar set of issues. Together, we decided to try something radically new, in part out of desperation, since both of us had struggled with these issues for some time, and in part because our institution was able to provide the professional development support to effect the change. We met with our institution’s teaching and learning coordinator and director of institutional effectiveness to explore options as to how we might change the course design to better teach students the skills necessary to construct a logical and evidence-based persuasive argument, while at the same time, develop an “other-oriented” approach to critical thinking. We decided upon a problem-based learning (PBL) strategy because PBL presented itself as an active learning strategy well-suited to the development of evidence-based persuasive speeches. It required, however, a thorough rethinking on our part of how we delivered instruction and how we might shift more responsibility for learning to the students.

The key to PBL is the use of small group collaboration. We presented each group with a contentious contemporary issue that required the group to take a stand. In such a setting, students can learn domain knowledge and practice the critical-thinking skills necessary to build arguments and counterarguments. Of special interest to us was adopting an instructional approach that could create a set of conditions for students to practice other-oriented thinking. This was a radically different way to teach a basic public speaking course, but we were so frustrated with current learning outcomes in the class, we decided to go for it!

### Trial by Fire

We created a “group speech” assignment to be developed using a PBL strategy. The old adage that two

---

heads are better than one might actually assist us in getting students to create that logical, evidence-based, other-oriented persuasive argument we longed to see. What did we have to lose beyond a fiery end? At this point, nothing, and our students had everything to gain. Using a true “flipped-class” model, students were asked to engage the content outside of class through chapter readings, quizzes, and homework activities. We organized our instruction into mini-lectures that covered key content—persuasive tone, competence, credibility, confidence, sound reasoning, and assembly of evidence—while dedicating significant class time to small-group work, allowing students to explore and build evidence in support of their positions.

We have used a variety of topics as a context for problem solving in the past, including educational inequity in rural communities, gun violence, overconsumption and waste disposal, and food science and childhood obesity. The first semester, we chose the problem for the students, thinking it would ease them into this new kind of PBL classroom. Since that time, we have adopted different methods for selecting a problem. We might give students a broad topic, such as gun violence, then let each team formulate its own problem related to that topic. More recently, we held a brainstorming session and had students vote on a topic and problem that they felt was important to examine throughout the entire semester. This gleaned the most buy-in from students.

Once a problem has been identified, students work within their individual groups to prepare a group speech. Criteria for the group assessment are very specific. All members of the group must have speaking role, the speech should include all of the elements found in a typical persuasive speech assignment, group members should dress appropriately, and lastly, a visual aid that enhances delivery should be used.

Once the assignment is explained and questions are answered, the real work begins. The group assigns roles to each team member, then begins researching the problem, developing the speech, and attending to nuances of delivery, including the use of visual aids. Instructors are available to facilitate the learning process, and therein lies the challenge for faculty. We must tease out issues and gently direct the learning process while not providing answers. Students must be allowed to discover, explore, and learn from each other. The end result product is a 15- to 20-minute group persuasive speech to be delivered in front of classmates. The group receives one grade for their performance, so the stakes are high. Speeches are assessed using a rubric whose criteria had been discussed with students early on in the process.

### **Lessons Learned**

First, we needed to keep in mind that using PBL and creating a group speech assignment was a journey, not a destination. It was an attempt to find a more

effective method for nurturing the critical-thinking skills necessary build an effective persuasion speech. We were fortunate in that the PBL approach had gained momentum at our institution, that colleagues were available to assist us in the development of the project, and that the administration encouraged risk-taking in pursuit of improvement.

We did indeed take a huge risk moving away from a more traditional lecture / discussion instructional model, but we are beginning to see the payoff. Students are benefitting from being held more accountable for their own learning. Moreover, we’re discovering that teamwork creates peer pressure to perform and to defend one’s ideas when there are disagreements. Peer pressure is a motivator, and students appear to be doing a better job evaluating resources and building more solid evidence-based arguments. Most importantly, we are beginning to see a glimpse of an other-oriented approach to thinking. Arguments are less “self” focused, less about moral and personal conviction, and more about the issue itself and building a defensible solution, not arriving at a single “right” answer to a problem. We are discovering that collaborative problem solving creates conditions for “other-directed” thinking. At the end of the day, that is our wish. We want students to think for themselves. Engaging the world with an open mind is an attitude necessary for lifelong learning. By way of our “group speech” PBL assignment, we are encouraging students to entertain different ways to understand and solve difficult real-world problems.

**Christy S. Adkins**, *Professor, Communication*

**Roshun Radford**, *Assistant Professor, Communication*

For further information, contact the authors at Madisonville Community College, 2000 College Dr., Madisonville, KY 42431. Email: [christy.adkins@kctcs.edu](mailto:christy.adkins@kctcs.edu) and [roshun.radford@kctcs.edu](mailto:roshun.radford@kctcs.edu)