Instructional Developers and Instructors as Collaborators in the Oral Presentation Assignment

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Student oral presentations offer a wide range of benefits to the audience, to the students giving the presentation, and to the instructor. However, like so many other potentially valuable teaching techniques, the student oral presentation can become ineffective by underestimating the importance of planning and by overestimating students' abilities. The instructional developer plays a significant role in helping instructors maximize the positive experiences for students preparing, giving, or listening to oral presentations. The instructional developer serves as a guide to lead instructors through the maze of decisions necessary in any teaching situation and, when appropriate, to suggest other goals and teaching strategies. It is the purpose of this paper not to give a specific formula for effective oral presentations in a classroom but rather to discuss aspects of the oral presentation that the faculty developer can help the instructor explore. In this article, student oral presentations will be defined as those projects 1) assigned in advance of the actual presentation date, 2) given by the student orally, 3) presented to an audience, usually in a classroom situation, and 4) graded or evaluated by the instructor. The aspects of an oral presentation which are appropriate for the developer to help the instructor examine include goal setting, topic selection, research, grading, audience, and the student presenter.

GOAL SETTING

The first question the developer should explore with the instructor is: What do you want students to learn from this course? Once the goals are established, the developer has an avenue for directing the instructor towards a consideration of appropriate means for achieving the desired goals. The instructional developer can assist the instructor in determining if the oral presentation is an appropriate technique to accomplish the instructor's goals. The developer can indicate to the instructor that assigning oral presentations to students is an excellent teaching technique if the primary goal is to provide practice in oracy (public speaking and listening skills). If the instructor is not interested in developing students' public speaking abilities or if the instructor does not feel there is sufficient class time for oral presentations, then alternative techniques, such as research papers, may be more appropriate. If the goal of the instructor is to expose students to a greater quantity of literature on a topic, then perhaps book and article critiques are better suited for achieving the goals.

Instructors may express additional goals that the oral presentation format may adequately address. One goal may be to provide students with an opportunity to make use of existing research knowledge and to learn new skills when seeking alternative resources. Another goal may be to allow practice in the organization of academic materials; this practice provides an opportunity for students to experience the process of choosing the most appropriate information and concepts central to a well-thought-out topic. An oral presentation can provide the impetus for thorough knowledge of a topic area. The prospect of standing in front of the entire class can be a powerful incentive for the student to prepare and know the material. Regardless of the instructor's goals, the role of the instructional developer is to assist the instructor in making the goals explicit so the presentations will reach the objectives of the assignment.

TOPIC SELECTION

Once oral presentations have been chosen as an appropriate teaching technique, the developer can assist the instructor in establishing the parameters of the topics to be covered. The developer can explore with the instructor some alternative selection strategies. A number of equally acceptable methods

for setting parameters exist; the choice depends on the nature of the course and on the specific course goals set by the instructor. The developer must make the instructor cognizant of the alternatives and some of their likely results. This may be accomplished by asking the instructor questions such as: Are the presentations designed to present essential material to the class? Are the presentations a means for students to delve into a portion of the subject matter which interests them the most?

One method for establishing topic parameters merely lets the range of topics be open to the interest of the students; this option is characterized by the statement "choose a topic." At times, instructors may be trapped in their own occupational culture, not realizing that students pick from among a side and varied range of topics, topics that may not fit together in a coherent package. Although this approach provides a broad exposure to the subject matter, students may find it difficult to focus their topics.

A second topic selection method provides a list of topics for students to choose from; this option is more restrictive, yet still provides a degree of flexibility for students. Some of the consequences of this method include a more narrowly defined focus and a higher rate of congruency with the subject matter. While students may not be particularly excited about their topics, this method does allow the instructor to have more control over the range of material.

In other instances, it might be most appropriate for the instructor to actually assign specific topics to students assuring that the topics will fit the goals of the course. Students may, in fact, prefer the latter two approaches which reduce ambiguity and uncertainty on their part. However, it may reduce the level of excitement among many students since it limits their choice of research projects. Whichever method is utilized, the developer should aid the instructor in working through the consequences as they relate to the goals of the course in general and the oral assignment in particular.

COLLECTING RESEARCH

If the instructor has decided to use the oral presentation to provide students with an opportunity to conduct research, then the instructional developer and the instructor should

explore several resource potentials. A discussion of research should include ways in which the class will go about doing the research, the kinds of research possible, and the limitations and possibilities of the school library. It is easy for instructors to overestimate students' abilities to conduct research; what may be common sense to the instructor may not be to a student, particularly at the undergraduate level. Knowing how to find and organize information is a learned skill. As she/he would for any assignment requiring research, the instructor should be prepared to explain clearly the type of research required. The sources available for ferreting out information are practically limitless; however, students will quite likely establish the library as their primary source.

An expectation of library research provides the developer with a forum for working with the instructor to explain discipline-specific journals, periodicals, and other source materials that will make up a valid research bibliography. Students will not instinctively understand the difference between periodicals such as *Time* or *Good Housekeeping* and scientific journals such as *Social Problems* or *English Quarterly*. If the research is to reflect scholarly activities, then the instructor must make that requirement clear to the students.

Research, whether for oral presentations or other assignments, is an activity for which planning is imperative. Since some students are not familiar with the organization and operation of libraries, the developer might suggest to the instructor that the class tour the library or have a library representative explain how to use the facility and discuss specific research sources. This discussion should include resources which students may not know about, such as abstracts, discipline-specific indexes, et cetera.

The developer should alert the instructor to the limits of the library. A research assignment could exhaust the library's resources and put some students at a disadvantage for finding appropriate material. Before assignments are made, the instructor should investigate the amount of material the school library has on a given subject limiting the chance that source material will be depleted. The instructor may decide to place some source materials on reserve so they will be available to a greater number of students. Ultimately, it may be necessary to direct students to other available resources or, if necessary, reevaluate

the expectations of the research to be completed. Here, again, the developer can help the instructor make a realistic appraisal of the research assignment.

The use of research in conjunction with an oral presentation should be suggested as an opportune time for the instructor to discuss with the class different topic approaches. For example, alcoholism is a subject which can be addressed by various disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and social work. Students will not intuitively recognize and/or be able to articulate the differences in conceptual schemes. The students need to know that the focus of the presentation will vary depending on the orientation of the discipline.

The developer should caution the instructor not to overestimate the students' skills when she/he requires original research. The instructor should be aware of the amount of previous research experience students bring to the class. However well-prepared students might be, gentle prodding of their memory will prove useful. Consequently, the developer can discuss with the instructor various research strategies students may find beneficial. One such technique is to produce brief handouts which outline methods for conducting content analysis or survey analysis and which outline procedures for interviewing or developing observational skills. The instructor can consider giving examples of each methodological type or can inform students where examples may be found. If students are not prepared in research methods, it might be appropriate for the instructor to give specific directions in research methods or to limit research expectations.

GRADING

An important question the instructor and developer need to consider is: How will the oral presentation assignments be graded? Ideally, instructors should establish grading guidelines prior to giving the oral presentation assignment. In addition to alleviating students' concerns about how they will be evaluated, a clear statement of expectations by the instructor will make achieving the objectives of the assignment more likely. The role of the instructional developer may be to explore alternative grading systems with the instructor and to propose alternative ways for the instructor to distribute this information

to the students. One simple technique is to supply an outline or critique sheet including a detailed breakdown of the presentation format with corresponding grade weights. Students will then have precise information about how the assignment will be graded. The handout will also aid students in making decisions about which aspects of their presentations need the most attention.

Students may be especially concerned about how much of their grade will depend on speaking or acting ability. In discussing this aspect of the oral presentation grade with the instructor, it is important for the faculty developer to point out that just as spelling and grammar "count" in a written report outside of English class, so should good oral delivery "count" in oral reports outside of speech class. Since the instructor may not be trained specifically on the technical aspects of speech delivery such as tone, pitch, pause, or emphasis, she/he probably will not want to grade on those aspects. However, student presenters should be reminded that they are responsible for delivering the material in a manner that is clear and understandable to everyone in the room.

If the instructor has students who feel they have no speaking abilities whatsoever, other grading opportunities are possible. A viable alternative that can be suggested by the developer is for the instructor to require each student giving an oral presentation to hand in an outline and bibliography sometime well in advance of the presentation. Outlines will help the students to ascertain and focus on their main points and will also make the instructor aware of the logic employed in preparing the presentation. Bibliographies, in turn, will help the instructor evaluate the degree to which students used acceptable sources.

Along with the outline, the presenters can be asked to supply test and discussion questions. These questions are an obvious aid to the instructor, and they further encourage the presenter to focus on his/her main points. By requiring the student presenter to write out test questions, the instructor gives the message to the rest of the class that the student's report is considered important information for which they are responsible.

AUDIENCE

What role will the audience play in the oral presentation? This question may prove to be the hardest one for the developer to assist the instructor with, given a conceptually more limited range of solutions. Often, the most neglected and most difficult aspect of the oral presentation assignment is achieving audience involvement. If the oral presentation is to be effective for all, the audience must be accountable for the information and must have an active role in the assignment. Whether the material presented is new or supplementary, the instructor needs to make clear to the audience the value of the presentation and the degree of importance the information has in the course content.

The most common method of involving the audience is to include the presented information on tests and quizzes. It might be appropriate for the instructor to require individuals or small groups to supply pertinent questions for testing purposes. Another method is to require outlines from the audience after each presentation. Either activity may be done by individuals or in small groups. Small groups can be more advantageous because they reduce the instructor's paper corrections and still manage to ensure greater retention of information.

Often, a question and answer period at the end of the delivery is a profitable aspect of the presentation. It provides a time for clarification and, most importantly, involves listener participation.

STUDENT PRESENTER

One of the most stressful situations a student will likely be placed in during her/his college career is that of presenting material in front of a class. The process by which material is presented and the content of the report are equally important. What will the instructor need to do to prepare the students for the actual process of presenting their reports? Regardless of how well a student has researched his/her topic, if the presentation is poorly prepared or unorganized, the point will be lost. In essence, using oral presentations as a teaching technique assumes that the students have both teaching and research skills.

When students give an oral presentation, it is important

that they realize they are not just parroting their collected bits of information, but that they are actually teaching important material to the class. Consequently, they are responsible for the delivery of information and concepts in an interesting, clear, and understandable manner. Although many instructors may not be well-versed in speaking skills, they do have a wide array of teaching techniques that may be of great help to the students in accomplishing their task. In this area the instructional developer can be of great assistance to the instructor. He/she can explore with the instructor that instructor's own strategies for delivery and retention. This exploration is an excellent technique for helping instructors examine their own skills as teachers. The instructors may be advised to share some of these strategies with the students so that student presentations can be more effective.

SPEAKING TIPS

It will benefit all involved if the instructor spends the necessary time and effort reinforcing appropriate speaking behaviors prior to the presentations. This reinforcement will have an impact on the overall quality of the presentations in two ways. First, students will be more familiar with the mechanics of public speaking. Second, it is probable that a greater expectation of quality in the delivery of the presentation will emerge.

If classtime allows, a handout of public speaking tips and a brief discussion of those items will give students direction and greater confidence. At the minimum, an outline will provide students with the fundamentals of public speaking. Often, students' fears of public speaking can be eliminated by having them practice in small groups. (See appendix for a list of speaking tips which can be used when working with instructors.)

CONCLUSION

Faculty developers have a unique opportunity to help instructors enhance the classroom experience for all participants. Developers can advise faculty of fundamental practices for designing and implementing the student oral presentation resulting in a better classroom encounter. At the very least,

the instructional developer can assist the instructor in clarifying and articulating his/her course expectations and goals.

Although this article has concentrated on the oral lecture-type presentation, the reader need not disregard other forms of student-led presentations. Discussions, field trips, films, and readings are only a few of the many possibilities. Whatever the form of presentation, students will require explicit direction and guidance from the instructor.

One final note—when left up to their own ingenuity, students will be able to produce an adequate presentation. However, the range of quality in the presentations will vary greatly. There will always be variability, but careful planning by the instructor with aid from the faculty developer will encourage more careful planning by students and will limit the extent and nature of the deviation.

APPENDIX

The following are tips that the instructional developer can pass on to faculty and students:

1. Speakers must know their materials! A student can dramatically improve his/her delivery simply by being well-prepared.
2. Speakers need to show enthusiasm. An audience will be more enthusiastic if the speaker is enthusiastic.
3. The speaker needs to know his/her audience. Who will be listening? How involved with the topic is the audience? How informed is the audience about the topic? Will there be questions during or after the presentation? What kinds of questions does the presenter anticipate?
4. Speakers should strive to be spontaneous in their delivery. Spontaneity makes the talk more interesting to listen to. A speaker can and should use note cards but should not read from a paper.
5. An outline, especially one turned in prior to the presentation, can help the speaker clarify the main points and supporting information, anecdotes, et cetera, needs to be established. The presentation should be kept simple and to the point. The student presenter should be sure to utilize all the appropriate parts of a speech including introduction, body, and conclusion.
6. Visual aids are a good way to draw and maintain interest from an audience as well as to highlight main points. However, the visual aids must be appropriate and must support the presentation. To help keep the report proceeding smoothly, the aids should be checked to make sure they work, and when not being referred to, set aside or covered up.

7. The speaker must practice the speech out loud. While practicing, he/she should go through all the physical motions and gestures expected to be used during the presentation.
8. Stage appearance is often as critical to the mechanics of the presentation as the material itself. Speakers should establish a positive demeanor and expect to be nervous. Students need to be assured that most everyone feels anxiety when talking in front of others.
9. Speakers should not apologize. First, they should not need to, and second, apologies do not move the speech forward. If a mistake is noted by a member of the audience, the speaker should thank him/her for the information, correct the mistake, and proceed.