

Speaking Across the Curriculum: Why's and How's

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When asked what skills they are looking for in marketable college graduates, employers are stating, almost univocally, that they are seeking people with excellent oral and written communication skills (Curtis, Windsor, and Stephens, 1992). Since *Writing Across the Curriculum* began in 1965, growing acceptance of such programs has led to the integration of writing skills within a multiplicity of classrooms and disciplinary settings (Steinfatt, 1986). Oral communication skills, however, lag woefully behind in classroom coverage. Because most of our communication time is spent orally, and because our students will be gauged as competent or incompetent primarily on their oral skills, we, as responsible educators, need to reinforce oral presentation skills in order to allow our students to succeed in an increasingly competitive job market.

Because most people fear public speaking (Goleman, 1984), and because most educators are pressed for classroom time, many educators are reluctant to add oral components to their curriculum. However, as with any performance-based skill, repetition and reinforcement are the keys to successfully and consistently incorporating good oral communication behaviors. This essay seeks to establish the need for *Speaking Across the Curriculum*, and will then provide concrete suggestions as to how oral assignments can be implemented in a variety of classroom settings.

A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* noted that over 400 businesses who had been surveyed named communication skill as the number one skill they sought in college graduates (Morreale, 1999). Other studies back this up. In 1997, a group of Fortune 500 executives also named communication skills as a primary personal quality sought in college graduates looking for employment (Morreale, 1997).

Presentations can offer the students an opportunity to highlight their scholarship. It is required that the students taking the basic composition course at Georgia College and State University present the findings of their research papers orally to their classes. It is important when we give such assignments that we give our students clear guidelines to follow. I recommend the following guidelines: Make sure that your students maintain eye contact. Reading a manuscript means that they will not be able to maintain eye contact, which, in turn, means that they will be more nervous and the audience will not necessarily attend to

their presentations. Speakers who maintain eye contact are able to receive feedback from their audiences, which can allow them to modify their presentations accordingly. Speakers who are reading have no such luxury and, thus, may not adjust or acknowledge feedback (Beebe and Beebe, 1997).

I also ask that my students talk to the audience, rather than reciting or reading to them. Conversational delivery means that the speaker is using language that is appropriate to the formality of the presentation, but is delivering it in a confident way that sounds more natural than artificial. Beginning speakers often become a bit too casual, using many verbal fillers, such as "um," "uh," "like," and "ya know." This can easily be remedied through practice. One way to make them aware of the problem is to have a bowl in which you have inserted strips of paper on which are written very broad topics, such as "television." The student draws a topic, and is asked to speak on the topic for thirty seconds without using a verbal filler. Complete sentences are not necessary, so students could just list television shows or personalities. This exercise makes students realize how frequently they revert to verbal fillers, and how, with a bit of discipline, they can be eradicated.

While oral presentations seem suitable for courses that highlight verbal ability, they are excellent in any classroom. Kastberg (1997), describing how she uses oral presentations within her statistical analysis classes, notes that her assignment require her students to identify a thing or phenomenon on campus that can be measured using statistical tools. Each group member is put in charge of one aspect of the research. Upon completion of the research, their findings are written up individually, and as a group report, and are then presented orally to the class.

I have found that group presentation can enhance students' interest in and retention of subject matter. After being distressed by how bored my students were with reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I utilized a project I had heard about years earlier. I asked my class of about 25 students to form groups based on the major characters. We ended up with six groups: Puck, Bottom, Oberon, Titania, Lysandar, and Hippolyta. The groups were then asked to imagine that their character was going to be a guest on a talk show. They had one class period to develop questions, create a format, pick a talk-show host or hosts, determine who would enact the character, and what

parts the other group members would assume. For the sake of *Jerry Springer-esque*, antics, the other group members often take on the personas of other characters within the script. The Titania group will, for example, bring on Oberon, forcing an on-air showdown, and will demand an explanation for his pernicious behavior toward her. This assignment consistently exceeds my expectations. Formerly reticent students turn in remarkable performances as characters or hosts, and students who seem to be asleep show a keen insight into plot and character development.

The assignments mentioned have been predicated upon classes containing no more than 30 students. The instructor of large classes can also implement oral skills by making students give short presentations, perhaps only 30 seconds in length, in which a concept

is defined and explained. Larger classes can also be broken into smaller sections, time permitting, which can provide an opportunity for lively debate and discussions. Not only is this another assessment tool, it is also a way to promote interaction between students and faculty. Students who have participated in large lecture classes that utilize these strategies report that the techniques succeeded in making the class seem like a small seminar (Morreale, 1998).

The ability of our students to communicate may affect the sorts of jobs offered them. By utilizing formal or informal presentations within our classrooms, we are provided with another tool of assessment as well as a way to improve students' futures as employees and as community leaders.

Technology for Teachers: See It, Do It, and Implement It

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The outcomes of the technology for teaching and learning cannot be automatic, they are the result of a collaboration between the teacher, student, and the designer of the technology (Poole, 1997). The question is, how can we go beyond the fancy formats of the presentations to obtain a collaborative result of teaching and learning. One of the answers is to let teachers see it, do it and implement it. Funded by the University System of Georgia Teaching and Learning Grant, a curriculum/technology alignment model has been developed to enhance Kennesaw State University's pre-service teachers' mathematics methods course.

Curriculum/Technology Alignment Model

The curriculum/technology model mainly consists of three blocks: curricular contents, technology components, and instruction. Curricular contents include major topics of mathematics that are required by the NCTM. They are numeration and number sense, place value, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division with whole numbers, concept and computation of fraction, decimal, ratio, percentage, measurement, probability, statistics, geometry, and problem solving. Each of the topics is specified with grade levels (K-5). Technology components are categorized into World Wide Web resource, mathematics software, audio and video material, and multimedia application, plus mathematics manipulative and other instruments,

projected or printed. Instruction bridges the curricular contents and technology components. Within the instruction section, teachers design a lesson with specific mathematics content that is aligned with one or multiple technology components. The instruction includes specific and measurable instructional objectives, supportive and learning-focused instructional activities, and a reasonable assessment plan.

Pre-service Teachers Training

Mathematics instructional programs should use technology to help all students understand mathematics and should prepare them to use mathematics in an increasingly technological world (NCTM, 1998). To meet this standard, those involved in pre-service teachers' training are challenged to implement innovative, effective technology as part of the mathematics methods class. The author has adopted curriculum/technology alignment model to provide KSU pre-service teachers with five-phases of training in the early childhood and elementary mathematics methods classes. These are: reviewing, exploring, identifying, developing, and teaching.

The training starts with reviewing. Pre-service teachers are guided to review NCTM standards, Georgia's Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) standards and local mathematics curriculum. The review provides them with a global view of mathematics teaching and learning, sequences of math-