

Engaging Students Through Presentations, Peer Critiques, and Technology

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Introduction

Many professors in most disciplines assign individual and/or group presentations in their courses. Often, the focus is placed on the presenter(s). The non-presenting students are assumed to be the audience. In some students' minds that may be a day to skip class, a day to work on other assignments or readings, or even a day to physically be attentive to the presenter while they accomplish other tasks in their mind. Thus, a "speech day" is just that for a presenter, but a "speech daze" for the non-presenters.

As professors of theory and skills-based courses, we are often confronted with the task of engaging the non-presenters, which is how students not presenting often see themselves. Therefore, we frequently have found ourselves in a position of teaching students how to play the role of audience.

What we have learned in studying and teaching communication is that all presentations are a form of public speaking. Typically when we prepared students for presentations we provided public speaking advice that Detz (1998) states "typically falls into two categories: (1) the content category, or (2) the delivery category" (p. 34) in terms of the presenter. However, we have found that the ultimate speaking advice for all students—presenters and non-presenters—falls in the category of listening. By assigning all students a listening responsibility during individual and/or group presentations, we have helped promote active learning.

Early in our careers as communication instructors, we began exploring various ways to involve all of our students in practicing communication skills in classes that centered on delivering speech presentations. The act of writing, organizing, and delivering an effective speech was central to our course objectives. Because public speaking is one of the most valuable skills college students can gain to enhance their career opportunities, executing multiple speeches has been an integral goal to the successful development of our courses. Thus, the students enrolled in our classes delivered between four and five speeches a semester. This issue led us to frequently ponder the question: How do we engage students in class on the many days they are not speaking?

Answering this question led us to develop speech days that were filled with student engagement and opportunities for all students to hone their communicative abilities especially in the area of listening, which is by far the most dominant

communication activity that people engage in daily. Regardless of the type of speech our students were delivering, we planned presentation days with a list of listening roles that students would play during each class session. In order to develop the lifelong learning skill of listening, students alternated between three categories: (a) presentations, (b) peer critiques, and (c) technology.

Presentations: The Role of Listening from the Audience Perspective

Students assigned to give presentations, whether individually or as a group, concentrate on content and delivery.

The goal, as Marton (2000) states, "is to design a winning presentation, which is constructed by thinking about the presentation from the audience's perspective" (p. 5). Student presenters spend time listening to their audience by completing an audience analysis, constructing a speech and its delivery, and by considering what they have learned from other people's presentations who presented in front of the same audience. They are taught to keep in mind that "everything must be run through the filter, expectations, needs, and bias of the audience" (Marton, 2000, p. 5).

Once the speech is designed and delivery is practiced, students arrive to the classroom ready to talk to their listeners. First, they place their name on the board in a slot that denotes the number of students speaking during that particular class session. Second, when it is their turn to speak, they execute what they have determined to be the appropriate oral, visual, and nonverbal communication that reaches all listeners. Third, when they are not speaking, they record similarities and differences that presenters had about the audience's perspective.

Peer Critiques: The Role of Listening as the Audience

In order to examine the impact of the presenters' listening process, a group of students are required to critique presenters of the day. Specifically, this group listens for "the purpose of making reasoned judgments about

presenters and the credibility of their messages” (Brydon & Scott, 2003, p. 86). We emphasize to the students that they are not effective critical listeners unless they actively participate in the presentation.

Peer-critique students begin by focusing on their presentational styles based on the nonverbal feedback they provide to the presenter(s). Before a presenter begins, the non-presenters are reminded of the importance of their presentational styles and professionalism as they participate in the speech presentation of their colleagues. We typically remind audience members that they need to sit up straight, make eye contact with the presenter, provide positive nonverbal feedback, and take notes during the presentation to demonstrate and enact professionalism and respect for the presenter.

During the presentation, peer-critique students complete a pre-designed critique form organized to help them determine presenters’ strengths and weaknesses as well as provide critique consistency in areas of communication competencies. Critique consistency is important to grading based on Patri’s (2002) study that found that “when assessment criteria are firmly set, peer- feedback enables students to judge the performance of their peers in a manner comparable to those of the teachers” (p. 109). In presentational speaking, “feedback or criticism is a method used by teachers to inform students that aspects of their performance need to be altered or maintained” (Book & Simmons, 1980, p. 135). Therefore, peer-feedback focuses on strengths (what should be maintained) and weaknesses (what should be altered).

At the end of each presentation, peer-critique students give a brief verbal assessment of the presenters’ abilities. The presenters also have an opportunity to give feedback on how audience members related to them during their presentation. Thus, a dialogue is created on assumed audience perspectives and actual audience perceptions based on content and delivery. Presenters and non-presenters are videotaped throughout the presentation.

Technology: The Role of Listening for Audience Engagement

The final group of students videotapes (a) the presenters’ presentations, (b) the audience members during the presentations, and (c) the

feedback dialogue between the two. This procedure allows the audience-centered process of public speaking to be captured and the demands of effective listening skills to be highlighted.

Because effective listening skills are influenced by presentation environment management, technology students on a speech day also perform the following: (a) prepare the spatial arrangement of our classroom at the beginning and end of class; (b) provide presenters’ with set-up assistance; (c) collect presenters’ professional materials including full- sentence outlines and handouts; and (d) time speeches and provide each presenter with the appropriate time cues. Technology students also are concerned with eliminating obstacles in the presentation environment, such as a loud air- conditioner blower or a misplaced overhead projector, and assisting presenters with successful use of visuals. In short, they spend time listening to visual elements of the presentation—dress, gestures, visual aids, and environment. They provide awareness of how audience frames of reference were successfully employed.

Conclusion

We have found that by organizing speech days into the three categories of presentations, peer critiques, and technology, all students are engaged in all of our class presentation days. Students have the opportunity to engage in presentations by listening from the audience’s perspective. By placing equal emphasis on presenters and non-presenters, we created a presentation environment that fosters interpersonal engagement. Students have responded positively to this format because they realize how much they are valued on presentation days. At the same time, instructors have responded positively because more students actively listen to the presentations and have much to contribute during the discussion sessions. The roles we all play in our classroom community are integral to the success of presentation assignments.

References

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