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## *They Speak, We Listen: Helping Students Create Effective Oral Presentations*

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How many times have you walked away disappointed from talks by famous scholars whose organization and delivery kill the interesting material of their presentation? This situation is not unique to our faculty community. All too often the oral presentations of our students are boring, tangential and a waste of precious class time. When I directed the Writing/Rhetoric Fellows Program at Brown with Associate Provost Nancy Dunbar (*Theatre, Speech and Dance*) for sixteen years, I often heard colleagues report that students more urgently needed help with their speaking than they did with their writing skills. We also recognize that they may need oral skills more often than writing skills in the working world. We found that assisting students with their oral skills is fairly easy, using the following short primer of best practices in public speaking.

Because students are more accustomed to writing papers than they are to delivering a speech, they are often more fearful of an oral than they are of a written assignment, and therefore more in need of faculty guidance and instruction. Students are often intimidated by their lack of practice, convinced that they will receive immediately negative peer feedback of bored expressions in their audiences, and confused by the difficulty of satisfying two audiences simultaneously (professor and classmates). But pointing out that many problems are common to both media may put them more at ease. Both communicative forms employ the same stages of creation: invention, organization, and delivery. In addition, both essays and speeches may suffer from weak structure (a result of lacking a clear introduction, organizing idea, conclusion, and supporting evidence); too many undeveloped ideas; chronological rather than thematic order; insufficient awareness of audience; derivative ideas that fail to demonstrate critical thinking; incoherence; deficiency in the intrinsic interest that can flow from a variety of supporting materials including visual aids etc.

But in the case of speech, the unique factor, effective delivery, most often is the element that trips up our students, and with which they most need faculty assistance. Since the effectiveness of an oral presentation depends about one-third on the content and

two-thirds on delivery, speeches need more redundancy and clarity of structure than do essays. This clarity can be achieved by strong reliance on forecasting, signposting, and recursivity. Since studies have shown that people retain only between 20-30% of what they hear, repetition often makes the difference between a speech that is indelible and one that is ephemeral.

In the years when we directed the Rhetoric Fellows Program on campus (1987-2003), we publicized the idea that integrating writing and speaking assignments provided an essential interaction to an activity best characterized as translation from one medium to another. Further, we noted that asking students both to write academic essays and to give oral presentations mutually reinforced communication skills across the curriculum.

So, what were the foundational principles we taught students in order to strengthen their oral speaking skills? Thinking backwards from ends to means, we suggested that an effective and engaging oral presentation should be simple and snappy; to the point; well and clearly organized; colorful, with relevant supporting materials; conversational and natural in delivery; and relevant to one's listeners. We instructed students to follow these steps in creating content for an effective oral presentation:

- brainstorm topics
- determine your purpose for speaking ( to persuade, inform, entertain, demonstrate knowledge, etc.)
- decide what your audience most needs to hear
- decide on a clear and coherent argument
- select your main points, supported with relevant evidence
- reiterate your main points in a clear conclusion

Students were advised not to try to cover more than one or two main ideas in any short presentation if they expected to develop each idea adequately and offer a variety of relevant and interesting supporting material. Ideally they would include all parts of their argument, from grounds to claims, to warrants, and, if appropriate, to backings.

Once the content has been set, students must think hard about their delivery, usually the most neglected aspect of their preparation. We told our students that a presentation is a performance. And since no experienced performer performs unrehearsed, their first rule should be to practice, practice, practice, preferably aloud to a sympathetic audience. Effective speakers know how to sound authoritative, thereby establishing audience trust. They know their material backwards and forwards, explaining the significance of their information as they go along. Because they speak from notes or an outline, not a text, they are able to speak in a conversational manner, so that they can actively think about what they're saying, and can improvise (reiterating and explaining difficult points) depending on the needs of their audience. Effective speakers take the physical space they need in order to feel comfortable. Some need a podium, others need to pace. Inexperienced speakers rarely think about whether their body language conveys confidence or terror, but students need to learn to avoid annoying non-verbal fluencies and verbalized pauses ("um", "you know", "really") that distract a listener. How many times have your students' body language telegraphed only the flight and panic syndrome, mumbling, nervously clutching their hair, twitching or twisting one leg around the other until they look like they will fall

over? We need gently to point out to our students how distracting these usually unconscious mannerisms can be.

Faculties can do a great deal to improve the presentational agility of our students by making them aware of these few basic concepts. Sadly, such training has fallen into disuse in the American academy. Once a focus of universal training in pedagogy, instruction in public speaking is relatively rare today. By providing these skills during their undergraduate years, we would actually be returning to an earlier model of teaching public speaking in English classes across the United States in the early twentieth century, a move both speakers and their audiences would greatly appreciate!

### *Postscript*

As Senior Lecturer in Speech and Director of Brown's Writing/Rhetoric Fellows Program respectively, Dr. Nancy Dunbar and I trained a dozen peer writing tutors (known at Brown as Writing/Rhetoric Fellows) between 1987 and 2003 during January break to coach and prepare students to give classroom presentations of various kinds (debates, paper presentations, discussions, etc.), offering an intense mini-class on essential aspects of good speaking. Rhetoric Fellows were assigned to assist students in classes where the professor required both written and oral work. They successfully helped speakers prepare talks of various kinds, and then critiqued the results. The model the Rhetoric Fellows Program offers to other universities and colleges is an exciting impetus to catalyze better speakers among college graduates.

For more information about assisting students with public speaking, please consult *Teaching and Persuasive Communication: Class Presentation Skills* (1997) by Dr. Patricia H. Hamm, with a forward by Dr. Nancy Dunbar, published by the Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning at Brown University and online at [http://www.brown.edu/sheridan\\_center/publications/handbooks/persuasive.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/sheridan_center/publications/handbooks/persuasive.pdf).