January 2007

Towards Curtailing Speaker Anxiety Via Impromptu and Oral Interpretation

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Recommended Citation
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Via Impromptu and Oral Interpretation

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ABSTRACT  
This article outlines a series of short oral assignments designed to help alleviate some of the anxiety that many students face when giving public presentations. The assignments consist of: giving an impromptu speech, giving a spoken performance of a song or poem of their choice, and a short reading from a children’s book. Each of these assignments are seen as building blocks, methods for reducing nervousness, methods for building confidence, while concurrently developing peer support as students are working towards a more formal presentation later in the semester. There should be a class debriefing/discussion after all three assignments have been completed. Here, students share their personal experiences and provide ideas to each other for successfully presenting their final speeches.

Objective  
To reduce public speaking anxiety by using the impromptu speech and two oral interpretation-type presentations as building blocks leading to the more formal informative/persuasive speeches.

Course  
These assignments can be used for any hybrid Basic Course, a public speaking course, or any course where students are required to give a formal presentation.

Introduction  
Public speaking is considered one of the most feared activities that humans engage in. According to the Book of Lists (1983), Americans report fearing public speaking more than any other activity, including death. But throughout their professional and private lives, people will find themselves in situations where they will be required to address a group, be it large or small. Many colleges require students to take a public speaking-type course before graduation. At least
75 percent of students in these courses report experiencing anxiety before they have even started the course (McCroskey, 1977) with the highest level of anxiety taking place for students just after the public speaking assignment is announced in class (Behnke & Sawyer, 1999). Subsequent research by McCroskey (2001) conducted with over 50,000 college students and adults found that the majority of Americans fear speaking in public. Another study of social phobias in general found that the majority of respondents feared public speaking the most, putting it in its own phobia class compared to a list of other social phobias (Kessler, Stein, & Berglund, 1998).

The impromptu speech and oral interpretation assignments are designed as metaphorical building blocks to have students confront and lessen their speaking fears as they prepare for their final larger presentation(s), which will, at the instructor’s preference, be either an informative or persuasive speech, or both. Public speaking instructors are encouraged to require their more difficult and anxiety-producing assignments for later in the semester, providing opportunities for students to develop confidence and strengthen their skills (Witt & Behnke, 2006). Therefore, these assignments will come towards the second half of the semester, leading towards the more formal and longer informative and/or persuasive speeches. These assignments will incorporate a variety of important aspects of public speaking, like anxiety, thinking on one’s feet, providing information via the spoken word, and speaking as performance. As the students take part in these assignments, they will strengthen their skills as well as develop an awareness of areas in need of improvement as they prepare for their final speeches which are given extemporaneously.

Directions

These assignments have primarily been used in the hybrid Basic Course. The semester is typically designed so the impromptu speech comes before the performances, and at the end of the semester, students will present their informative and/or persuasive speeches. Dates for each of these presentations are clearly listed in the syllabus and some discussion has taken place about the assignments in previous classes.

For the impromptu speech, students are given no prior knowledge about the topics at all, with the exception that they are all social issues and current events that they should all have some common knowledge about. On the day of the impromptu speech, students must choose from a variety of topics laid out on a table in front of the room. Upon their turn, they are instructed to go to the front of the room, pick a topic, take a look at it and spend a moment to collect their thoughts, introduce themselves, their topic, and begin speaking. They are timed by the instructor for two minutes and she provides a nonverbal cue to signal when they have completed their two minutes. If during the presentation, the student gets stuck, the instructor should feel free to give prompts to assist the student. They are evaluated on the following issues: could the speaker be heard, did the student make eye contact with the entire audience, were few detractors used, was sufficient information given, and did the speaker exhibit appropriate enthusiasm.
The students are required to do two oral interpretation presentations. The first one is referred to as a Performance. Students are required to choose the lyrics to a song or poem to recite before the class. The piece can be of any length and of any style. It can also be an original work or their creation. The basic requirements are that the item must have a personal meaning to the student and that it be something that is socially acceptable to the audience (devoid of explicit language). Students are required to recite the piece as they feel the author wished it to be performed. If the student chooses a song to perform, he/she is not to sing it. If there is a section of the song that lends itself to a bit of singing or melody, that is acceptable because it relates to the concept of this assignment as a performance and interpretation of the message and meaning. Upon conclusion of the piece, students are required to discuss their rationale for choosing the piece and what it meant to them. This provides them with a chance to add a bit of extemporaneous speaking to their presentation. Students are evaluated on the following issues: could the speaker be heard, did the student make eye contact with the entire audience, was the selection appropriate to the audience, were few detractors used, and did the speaker exhibit appropriate enthusiasm.

The next performance asks the students to choose a children’s book and perform it as if they were addressing an age-appropriate audience for the book. Picture books are the best to use for this assignment. Since the subject matter is “simple,” students are required to use their voice as it is suitable for the subject matter. They should shift voice tone, pacing, use varied voices to represent the characters, and any other creative measures they deem fit. “Performing” this reading relaxes the students, encourages positive feedback from the audience, adds some levity to the presentation days, and reduces the anxiety that many students feel from being in front of their classmates and instructor. In this final aspect of the assignment, students are evaluated in the same manner as they were for the song/poem performance.

Debriefing

After all three assignments have been completed, students engage in a class discussion with the instructor where they address the following questions:

1. Which performance did you feel was more difficult, the impromptu speech, the song/poem presentation, or the children’s book reading? Why?
2. What were the challenges you faced with each one?
3. Which one did you like the best?
4. How did you prepare for each one?
5. How do you think this will help you in preparing for the final speech?

The debriefing aspect of the assignment plays a number of significant roles for the students. Leading into these presentations, the students tend to share many of their anxiety concerns about speaking in front of the group, along with their concerns about whether or not they will have any personal knowledge about the impromptu subjects. Once these presentations have been completed, the debriefing time allows for them all to share in a collective sigh of...
relief, relax, and share their critical insights as to the significance and value of the assignment. Along with these insights, many students share their methods for success; how they were able to get through it, and advice for what others can do as they prepare for the final presentation(s) which takes place about 2 weeks later. The instructor also shares her insights about the quality of the work presented and provides general feedback for the class and suggestions. They receive their written feedback with specific comments during the next class period or two. This discussion period allows the students to recognize their strengths and areas they would like to work on, along with the fact that they are not alone in their experiences. Everyone is encouraged to share their thoughts and the instructor calls on students who have not shared.

The rationale for the order of the presentations is manifold. One could say that beginning with the impromptu speech gives the students a baptism by fire. In other words, they are, for the first time in the semester since class introductions, on their feet, in front of the room, bringing all of the elements of public speaking together in a two-minute time period. They are organizing a topic into some kind of sensible and logical order, they are providing information, although cursory, to the audience, they have done an audience analysis to make sure their presentation is appropriate, they are staying within a prescribed timeframe, and they are thinking quickly. For many students, it is the most difficult of the three.

Having the song/poem come second provides a more relaxing counter to the intense impromptu speech. Students consciously choose their own piece to present, they have some time to prepare, and are active participants in what they would like to share with the audience. For this part of the assignment, any emotions tied to this piece should be reflected in their presentation. The audience should have a clear idea as to why this piece is important to the person and more of that takes place during the debriefing discussion. Also, this gives the student the chance to allow their voices and bodies to be conduits of the messages they are sharing. This will prepare them for the emotional and passionate aspects that should be illustrated in their final presentations. For some students, the emotional pull of this assignment makes this the most difficult of the three.

Having the children’s book reading as the final assignment gives the class a chance to relax even more and have some fun with being in front of the room, underscoring the elements of telling a story, which in many ways, they do with their speeches. There is an innocence and simplicity of the messages put forth in the children’s stories, and in many ways, the students enjoy being presenter and audience member, since storytelling is fundamentally interactive and so is speechmaking. The students almost naturally change their voices to accompany the characters in the story and adjust their pacing to emphasize and underscore certain points. Some of the loudest applause comes from the presentation of these stories. Given the time constraints, students are not required to read the entire book and the instructor decides after a few minutes or at a particular time in the story to have the student stop.

Although these assignments are graded separately, they are interrelated and given in subsequent classes. The three presentations should be able to be completed in three, no more than four 50 minute class periods of 18-20 students. The debriefing period should be for about
10-20 minutes and can take place at the end of the final day or at the beginning of the following class period.

Appraisal

These assignments, done in successive class periods, allow for several positive things to happen for the presenters. They have an opportunity to stand in front of the class alone for literally the first time in the semester and think quickly and speak clearly without any prior significant preparation. Here, they have been able to face their fear of speaking, given that they have jumped in feet first. With the performances, they experience the ability of using their voices as a tool and an instrument. They see the effectiveness in changing tone of voice, pacing, pauses, use of body and eyes, and other nonverbal codes in communicating emotion and meaning. Having them choose a piece that has personal meaning to them also illustrates the importance of relating and connecting to one’s subject matter, how it evokes feelings and how those feelings can be expressed to others in the spoken word.

Another important aspect of this assignment is that it creates a support system and a sense of community in the class that clearly did not exist prior to the presentations. Students bond with each other over the perceived “ambiguity” of the impromptu assignment. In other words, many of them express a fear that they will not know the subject matter they will be asked to speak about and they tend to share these concerns with each other and come together quickly over this aspect of the assignment. They want to do well but they clearly want their classmates to also do well. They can often be heard giving encouraging words to each other and being outwardly supportive of those who struggle. They bond even further and come to understand each other a bit more deeply after listening to the song/poem presentations. In many cases, students have used this part of the assignment to self-disclose personal things that have not come up in class discussions. Oftentimes, the choices students make provide for an emotional connection which buoy them as they prepare for the informative and/or persuasive speeches which come towards the end of the semester, about two to three weeks later. With the children’s story, students are amused by the simplicity of the language and the fact that they, as adults, are reciting it to other adults. But, again, the informality of it encourages another level of anxiety reduction as they work up to the more formal presentations.

Students have said that although they were nervous prior to giving each presentation, they were not as nervous and anxious giving their final speeches, and they would have been had we not done these previous assignments. Part of the lessening of their anxiety comes from having these as “practice” or “warm up” assignments and the fact that there was a variety to the assignments. They have stated that in the moment of actually giving the initial presentations, they did feel nervous but as they reflected upon them, the assignments helped them to feel better prepared, develop a bond with their classmates, and give more effective speeches with minimized anxiety.
References


