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Improving Oral Communication Competency: An Interactive Approach to Basic Public Speaking Instruction

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Oral communication skills training is an integral component of undergraduate education (Friedrich, 1985; Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleson, 1985; Hugenberg, Gray, & Trank, 1993). Yet, Cronin and Glenn (1991) contend that:

Except for students majoring in communication, most undergraduates take *at most* one course emphasizing oral communication skills; therefore, most non-speech majors have little or no opportunity for structured practice with competent evaluation to refine and reinforce their oral communication skills. (p. 356)

Moreover, data suggest that the basic courses that undergraduate students do take fail to meet their oral communication needs (DiSalvo, 1980; Johnson & Szczupakiewicz, 1987; Mino, 1988; Pearson, Nelson, & Sorenson, 1981; Trank, 1990). Specifically, few basic course instructors spend adequate class time on oral communication skills practice (Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleson, 1985) or effectively illustrate how the oral communication skills presented in the course relate to students' personal, academic, or professional lives (Ford & Wolvin, 1993).

This essay shares an interactive approach to basic public speaking course instruction that allows instructors not only to present theory but also spend a majority of their class ses-

sions helping students better understand and more effectively apply oral communication concepts. Thus, the essay describes undergraduate students' oral communication needs, explains an interactive approach, discusses audiotaped lectures, and outlines course requirements. This approach enables undergraduate students to integrate knowledge of basic oral communication concepts into their personal and professional lives.

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' ORAL COMMUNICATION NEEDS

The need for effective oral communication is paramount for managing and manipulating information, for communicating effectively to exist within our information society, and for understanding the oral communication skills to effectively respond in culturally diverse environments (*Pathways*, 1993). Clearly, oral communication skills development is an essential prerequisite to prepare students to communicate orally outside the classroom. Unfortunately, primary and secondary school educators de-emphasize the importance of formal oral communication training. Many are guided by the misleading belief that children naturally learn effective oral communication skills as part of their developmental process. Thus, a majority of K-12 students do not master effective oral communication skills and are not competent oral communicators (*Guidelines*, 1991).

The Speech Communication Association (SCA) is committed to establishing standards for comprehensive and developmental programs for K-12 students. However, these programs will not occur overnight. At present, SCA reports that "only two state departments of education require that students complete oral communications courses" (*Guidelines*, 1991, p. 1). Under such circumstances, the basic course in-

structor at the college and university assumes the primary responsibility for introducing undergraduate students to and training them in oral communication skills. Obviously, these instructors cannot include all types of oral communication in a term or semester. For the most part, basic course instructors focus their efforts on training students in public speaking skills. In fact, Morlan (1993) notes "the primary classroom product that we have consistently offered to our varied constituencies across the academy has been, and still is, public speaking" (p. 7).

Gibson's, Hanna's, and Huddleson's (1985) survey indicates that when teaching the basic course, instructors combine "theory," which consists of "lecture, discussion, lecture-discussion, films, etc., exams and their discussion," and "performance," which is defined as "students overtly involved in giving speeches, debating, dialogue, etc." (p. 284). These authors report:

Of the 515 respondents . . . , slightly more than half indicate that their instruction consists of 30-40% theory. Another 19% reported a 50:50 ratio of theory and practice. This distribution suggests that a majority of basic course directors prefer a balanced course with moderate emphasis on performance assignments. It may be reasonable to describe the course as primarily a skills course; only 14% of the respondents report a 20:80 ratio of theory and practice. (p. 285)

Johnson and Szczupakiewitz (1987) observe that "within many university and college communication curricula, 'Introduction to Public Speaking' is typically one of the fundamental courses. This course reaches students with diverse academic backgrounds and career goals" (p. 131). Their data indicate that basic course instruction focuses primarily on informative and persuasive speaking with a strong emphasis on speech-related tasks, such as selecting a topic, analyzing an audience, gathering supporting materials and using visual

aids, outlining, listening, organizing the introduction, body, and conclusion, and delivering the speech.

Although Gibson, Hanna, and Huddleson (1985) find that basic course instructors are generally satisfied with course content and approach, these instructors list inadequate time to cover course content as one of their primary concerns. Moreover, surveys of alumni suggest that basic course instructors may not be fully aware of students' needs (DiSalvo, 1980; Johnson & Szczupakiewitz, 1987; Pearson, Nelson, & Sorenson, 1981; Trank, 1990). For example, a Pennsylvania State University survey of a representative population of 7,000 undergraduate public speaking students revealed that students want to learn public speaking skills that are directly applicable to "real life situations" (Mino, 1988). Because communication educators need to help students transfer basic course concepts to real life contexts, Ford and Wolvin (1993) recommend "continuing efforts to provide speech communication for undergraduate college students" and determining "how to better deliver that education so that it impacts on students' personal, academic, and professional lives" (p. 223).

Even though public speaking theory presents a rationale for the mechanics of effectively communicating with an audience, few students see the connection between learning public speaking skills and applying them beyond the classroom (Ford & Wolvin, 1993). It seems more practical for basic public speaking course instructors to emphasize the need for effective oral communication skills training in general. Thus, to emphasize the importance of the course, public speaking can be presented as one type of oral communication that employs the basic oral communication concepts inherent in *all* communication situations. In other words, creating various speeches is simply one means by which to practice oral communication skills and evaluate the level of mastery of these skills.

Furthermore, because the basic course is reasonably described as a "skills course" (Duran & Zakahi, 1987; Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleson, 1985), its primary objective must center on student skills development. To develop oral communication skills, students need to communicate orally at every opportunity. Because basic course instructors have limited class time to spend on theory and performance, and both are essential, alternative approaches to designing the basic course are needed.

THE RATIONALE FOR AN INTERACTIVE APPROACH

According to Laird and House (1984), interactive classroom instruction: (1) creates a classroom setting conducive to learning; (2) arouses and directs students' interests, experience, and energy; (3) helps the instructor lead discussions that stay on track and involve all students; and (4) improves oral communication skills. Thus, an interactive classroom environment emphasizes open communication by primarily focusing on student participation. This approach creates a climate that encourages proactive learning (Bedwell, Hunt, Touzel, & Wiseman, 1984; Cooper, 1986; Dunkin & Biddle, 1974; Jones, 1987; Powers, 1992; Rothwell & Sredl, 1992; Walklin, 1982). For example, Seaman and Felleny (1989) report that:

Interaction strategies promote depth in the learners' mental processing. The challenge of applying new knowledge to problems raised by peers or of interpreting it in terms of one's own experiences promotes deep processing of information, which in turn, leads to improved retention and recall of information. (pp. 119-120)

Even though the basic course is generally described as a skills training course, inadequate time is devoted to interactive learning. In fact, as Hanna, Gibson, and Huddleson

(1985) report, in most basic courses, major emphasis is placed on presenting theory while moderate emphasis is placed on performance assignments which require students to overtly demonstrate their oral communication skills. Presenting theory through lecture, lecture-discussion, exams and their discussion, and film or videotape may allow instructors to model the material they are teaching; to provide some immediate assessment of student learning and assimilation of the material; to add or delete examples that are necessary for audience adaptation; and to create a classroom culture that is warm and accepting, thus reducing speaker fear and apprehension. However, ultimately, this class environment creates a climate where students expect to observe rather than participate. Moreover, an instructor's lengthy in-class explanations and demonstrations of various styles of delivery, different methods of organization, and effective use of speaker notes, for example, illustrate for students that the instructor is prepared, understands, and can apply the material but allows limited time and opportunity for students to apply course concepts, to demonstrate their mastery of these concepts, to articulate clearly their performance strengths and weaknesses, and to evaluate their oral communication skills development.

Laird and House (1984) share a systematic method of developing and implementing a classroom environment that encourages learning through a closer student-instructor relationship. This type of environment requires interaction. Like Carl Rogers (1969), Laird and House contend that a positive learning environment depends on the qualities that exist in the relationship between student and instructor. These qualities are at the heart of the classroom climate. Thus, students' growth is stunted in "dismal climates," in which they are *talked to* rather than encouraged *to talk* (p. 7). In fact, Walklin (1992) explains that no learning can take place without active response from the learner. He believes:

A [learning] situation can be said to have been successful if the instructor's actions result in a desired change in [student] behavior. Throughout the [learning] session the instructor's role is that of [facilitator]. [She or he] should provide a framework within which the desired responses are made to occur. (p. 19)

Walklin's philosophy supports the implementation of an interactive approach to classroom instruction as a more effective way for the student to understand learning goals. Furthermore, he implies that by creating an environment in which the learner is encouraged to respond and interact with others, the potential for achieving the desired learning objectives is substantially increased.

Moreover, Powers (1992) contends that instructors will perform with excellence if they create abundant participation in the classroom; the excellent instructor creates abundant participation. This participation results in the learner investing him or herself in the learning process and, as a result, the learner will "have a high success rate in meeting course objectives" (p. 68). Similarly, Rothwell and Sredl (1993) suggest demonstrating knowledge of concepts through class activities as "an appropriate method of delivery . . . when the topic or skill lends itself to observation, there is a need to show a process in action, and there is value in providing step-by-step guidance in performing a task using a skill" (pp. 358-360). Moreover, these authors observe that "demonstrations can help reduce the gap between theory and practice" (p. 360).

An interactive approach incorporates teaching techniques that rely heavily on discussing and sharing among participants. This approach allows students to clarify their own thoughts and share these ideas with other participants (Seaman & Felleny, 1989). Interactive classroom instruction is a viable approach when designing, developing, and delivering the basic public speaking course. Because students must demonstrate skills in basic oral communication, particularly in public speaking, this approach provides a most

appropriate method for helping students attain oral communication skills competency. Following is a description of a specific application of the interactive approach that has been implemented at one campus of a large research university.

ELEMENTS OF AN INTERACTIVE APPROACH

Implementing this approach requires that instructors reduce their excessive reliance on presenting theory during class sessions and, instead, focus on methods that encourage cooperative, active learning. Developing and recording audiotaped lectures and creating an audiotaped lecture guide allow instructors to present theory and, at the same time, spend a majority of their class sessions helping students practice, develop, and evaluate their oral communication skills.

Audiotaped Lectures

The need for understanding theory is an essential part of the public speaking process. To help students become competent public speakers, instructors devise methods for presenting theory. Many instructors strongly rely on the lecture approach (Mino, 1991a; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994). However, because instructors list inadequate time to cover course content as a primary concern (Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleson, 1985), using limited class time to present theory through lecturing makes it difficult to save time for activities that help students develop and practice oral communication. Cronin and Glenn (1991) believe that "although oral communication activities represent a fundamental mode of learning, they are underutilized in lecture-oriented college courses" (p. 356).

Ideally, a combination of audiotape, film, videotape, and interactive multimedia provides the best basis for class

instruction and even "interactive" instruction outside the classroom (Cronin, 1994; Cronin & Kennan, 1994). However, much of this technology may be unavailable to instructors. Because audiotapes and recording and dubbing equipment are, in most cases, easily available, using audiotape provides an accessible, effective alternative to presenting theory during class sessions.

The instructor can use the class time typically devoted to lecturing to focus solely on helping students practice and improve oral communication skills. Moreover, because students' thoughts and expressions are "increasingly shaped by electronic media" (Haynes, 1990, p. 89), using audiotapes links "a specific [medium]. . . to particular modes of understanding" (Chesebro, 1984, p. 119). Students effectively use audiotapes for processing information, such as foreign languages, book content, and music. Therefore, audiotaped lectures have the potential to improve students' understanding of oral communication concepts. In fact, Terenzini and Pascarella (1994) report that audio-tutorial "showed statistically significant learning advantages of 6-10 percentile points over traditional approaches" (p. 30).¹

Audiotaped lectures prepare students to participate actively during class sessions. Thus, students use out-of-class time to review each audiotaped lecture and listen to these lectures as often as necessary to understand course concepts. Reading assignments reinforce and supplement the audiotaped lecture material.² Because students review audiotaped

¹ From 1985 to 1990, these authors reviewed some 2,600 books, book chapters, monographs, journal articles, technical reports, conference papers, and research reports produced over the past two decades describing the effects of college on students. These findings are published in their 1991 book, *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

lectures on their own, adequate time is available during class sessions for oral communication activities that reinforce theory and for focusing students' attention on effectively applying it. Class sessions also are used for instructor-student discussion that centers on organizing and developing individual speech topics. Thus, the interactive approach reduces the need for students to spend all of their time preparing assignments outside the classroom. Moreover, since some students avoid office conferences, and this avoidance often negatively affects their class performance, instructor-student preparation and discussion of assignments during class help students to complete these assignments more effectively.

Locating Adequate Facilities

Before devoting time to audiotaping lectures, one must determine if the institution provides a listening learning center, an area in the library, or an academic development center where audiotapes can be placed on reserve for students. Most institutions provide ample resources to accommodate both small and large sections of students. Because audiotaped lectures are an essential prerequisite to class interactions, students must listen to the assigned audiotape before the class session when the material is discussed. Completing audiotaped lectures in a timely manner positively

² Harford's (1993) essay, "Approaches to the Selection of Course Materials," published in Hugenberg's, Gray's, & Trank's *Teaching and Directing the Basic Communication Course*, recommends textbook selection based on (1) appropriateness, (2) organization, (3) readability, and (4) inclusion of additional materials, such as videotapes and computerized test banks. Through various publishers, instructors can customize their reading assignments to suit specific course needs. Benchmark and Brown, for example, provide a Master List that describes the chapters and sample speeches found in four public speaking texts. Instructors also can create a personalized text by combining any of these chapters, selecting sample speeches, and incorporating their own instructional materials.

affects students' class participation, skills development, and final course grade. Primarily, the instructor determines if and when students listen to each audiotaped lecture. However, staff members distribute audiotaped lectures and help monitor student listening patterns.

Providing staff with a loosely bound folder or notebook that contains the audiotape titles and a list of students enrolled in the course is one method of tracking student listening patterns. For verification, students provide the date and time they listen to each audiotape and their signature. The instructor determines whether or not students are prepared for class interactions by checking these entries and assessing the quality of class participation.

Developing and Recording Lectures

Public speaking course instructors select the topic and length of each lecture. However, instructors, while developing each lecture topic, should illustrate how the public speaking concept specifically relates to students' personal and professional lives. Instructors should structure, develop, adapt, and vocally deliver the lecture in the same manner they expect students to organize, develop, adapt, and deliver their presentations (see, for example, Frederick, 1986; Mino, 1991a; Weaver, 1982; Wills and Hammons, 1991). The lecture should include references to effective oral communication strategies, demonstrate ineffective oral communication strategies, and explain their impact on a variety of communication outcomes.

Recording the lecture does not require professional equipment. A good quality cassette recorder, one high quality tape per lecture, and a quiet room produce a set of good quality master recordings. Lecture audiotapes are dubbed to reproduce additional sets. Communication Series audiotapes used for foreign language tapes work best for quality, multiple recordings of each lecture. Ten sets of lecture tapes easily

accommodate four to six sections of 25 students per term or semester.

Creating An Audiotaped Lecture Guide

An audiotaped lecture guide directs students while they listen. Supplementary materials, such as handouts and assignment descriptions, can be included and organized to correspond to each oral communication concept. Worksheets provide visual cues that outline instructors' main ideas. Instructor-designed worksheets correspond to each audiotaped lecture. Structured worksheet guides help students more easily determine lecturers' major ideas and prevent them from misinterpreting major points or imposing a different structure than the one lecturers intend (Mino, 1991b; Phillips & Zolten, 1976). Students are also encouraged to include their questions (see Figure 1).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Successful basic public speaking instruction consists of clearly presenting theory and then allowing students to apply this theory through performance. The interactive approach relies primarily on incorporating class activities to consistently reinforce how knowledge of public speaking theory is practical and important beyond the public speaking setting. This method of combining theory and performance results in the "integration of learning" (Wright, 1993, p. 25).

Class Activities

After the instructor answers student questions concerning lecture audiotapes, worksheet guides, and reading assignments, public speaking concepts are reinforced through oral communication activities. Instructors should develop a reper-

toire of activities that adapt both to their teaching style and

LISTENING WORKSHEET	
Time Spent Listening:	
Hearing:	
Listening:	
Four Listening Operations	
(1)	
(2)	
(3)	
(4)	
Six Listening Problems and Solutions	
Problems	Solutions
(1)	(1)
(2)	(2)
(3)	(3)
(4)	(4)
(5)	(5)
(6)	(6)
Ten Tips to Improve Listening	
(1)	(6)
(2)	(7)
(3)	(8)
(4)	(9)
(5)	(10)
Your Questions:	

Figure 1

to student needs. These activities correspond to each audio-taped lecture assignment.

There are many sources for carefully designed oral communication activities. For example, the Speech Communication Association's five volume *SCA K-12 Oral Communication Teacher Training Workshop Manual* (1990), Arlie V. Daniel's (1992) *Activities Integrating Oral Communication Skills for Students Grades K-8*, Pamela Cooper's (1985) *Activities for Teaching Speaking and Listening: Grades 7-12*, and *The Speech Communication Teacher* include many excellent activities. Stephen E. Lucas has compiled some of the best exercises and activities in his *Selections from the Speech Communication Teacher 1986-1991* (1992) and its companion, *Selections from the Speech Communication Teacher 1991-1994* (1995). Ellen A. Hay's (1992) *Speech Resources: Exercises and Activities* presents exercises that are correlated with nine most commonly used texts in basic communication studies. Suzanne McCorkle's (1988) *Public Speaking Instructor's Resources Manual* for Osborn's and Osborn's *Public Speaking* (1994) also contains activities that effectively demonstrate oral communication concepts. Further, the annual Speech Communication Association's convention offers two programs that center on teaching activities: the Basic Course Commission's poster session and, the forerunner of the poster session, the Great Ideas for Teaching Speech (GIFTS) program. These programs showcase 5 to 18 instructors from across the nation who share their innovative ideas for speech instruction. Moreover, Raymond B. Zeuschner's (1995) book, *GIFTS: Great Ideas for Teaching Speech*, currently in its third edition, is a cumulative text. That is, this edition also includes essays appearing in the two previous editions. The book describes a variety of effective teaching ideas. Exercises can be used as designed, combined, or modified to achieve instructional outcomes.

Cronin and Glenn (1991) observe that "carefully designed assignments and activities provide students with multiple

opportunities to improve speaking and listening skills in a variety of content areas" (p. 356). Because the ultimate objective of the public speaking course is to train students to prepare and present speeches effectively, activities must clarify individual concepts and demonstrate how they are integrated during the speech-making process. Clarifying individual concepts prepares students to deliver their speeches and provides an excellent opportunity to illustrate how each public speaking concept applies to their personal, professional, and academic lives. Thus, they discover the relevance of course concepts in a variety of contexts.

The Radford University Oral Communication Program has shown that students benefit from oral communication activities. Cronin and Glenn (1991) elicited student opinion on the effectiveness of oral communication activities incorporated into their classes. The data revealed that "students feel that the active learning required by oral communication activities is preferable to the more passive learning in lecture-oriented courses" (pp. 361-362). In fact, "[s]tudents feel that oral communication activities place greater emphasis on sharing their ideas" (p. 362). Further, 73% of the students involved "indicated that the course was better due to the inclusion of oral communication activities" (p. 361). Similarly, faculty expressed positive reactions to oral communication activities. Specifically, "faculty feel that oral communication activities in their classes are a fundamental mode of learning because they promote cognitive structuring and higher levels of conceptualization for students" (p. 362).

The instructor's primary tasks during each class session include introducing the activity, acting as facilitator, observing and evaluating students' oral communication skills development, and debriefing students once the activity is completed. Moreover, because class sessions center on student performance, instructors can increase the number of public speaking experiences and more effectively integrate basic public speaking concepts into personal and professional con-

texts. For example, students present three graded speeches (informative, persuasive, informative or persuasive) and several ungraded talks that may include impromptu, personal object, visual aid, introductory, application speeches, and oral self-evaluations.

Introductory and application speeches are particularly useful for connecting public speaking concepts to personal and professional contexts. For example, students discover how a speech of introduction not only serves to acquaint students with their public speaking classmates but can also be applied during an employment interview, first date, or in other settings when they are asked to share something about their backgrounds, interests, or goals. Similarly, application speeches allow each student to describe the utility or value of a course concept or concepts in "real life" situations. For example, a nursing student might illustrate how effective listening skills are crucial for attaining correct patient information and following physician instructions.

Oral self-evaluations are speeches where students provide a self-analysis that describes both their public speaking strengths and weaknesses. Students discuss why they are successful with certain aspects of public speaking, where and why they experience weaknesses, and how the weaknesses might be improved. Students then incorporate their suggestions for self-improvement while preparing and presenting their next speech (Mino & Butler, 1995).

The approach also allows adequate time to review course concepts to improve students' understanding of theory and performance. A comprehensive exam that tests students' understanding of theory and performance is given after all oral communication concepts are presented and illustrated through oral communication activities. During the exam review, students are asked to explain clearly why they selected a particular response. Justifying responses not only helps students "think on their feet" but also provides review

for and interaction with classmates who can learn from these explanations by accepting or questioning them.

Graded speeches are presented during the latter part of the semester. Further, since students have delivered several ungraded speeches and have participated in a variety of class activities, they appear to be more comfortable communicating with their audience during graded presentations. Moreover, because the interactive approach gives instructors adequate time to focus on theory and performance, students are able to discuss and share regularly their attitudes and needs concerning both during class sessions. This information can then be used to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of the lecture audiotapes, worksheet guides, and oral communication activities.

USE PATTERN AND PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

The specific implementation of the interactive approach described herein has been under development for several years and, as of this writing, is being evaluated for its effectiveness. However, a preliminary examination of some data, which include audiotaped lecture verification records and freshmen and sophomore student responses to some questions appearing on a fifteen-item questionnaire support the viability of this approach.

Audiotape verification records indicate that approximately 92% of the 200 students enrolled in the course completed the audiotaped lectures in a timely manner. The 8% who failed to listen to the audiotapes before the concepts were discussed in class reviewed the material at a later time or dropped the course. Responses to some student questionnaire items suggest that, generally, students ranked the course as the best college course or compared it to the best course they

have taken. Approximately 86% of the students reacted positively to the audiotaped lectures. Many of these students appreciated the opportunity to review course concepts as often as they needed to improve their understanding of these concepts. Further, the audiotaped lecture guide helped them to identify and better understand the structure and content of the lecture. Students also reacted positively to class activities which, many indicated, encouraged discussion, application, and evaluation of their oral communication skills. Some students reported that their anxiety concerning public speaking decreased because they felt more comfortable speaking with the audience after consistently communicating orally during class activities.

Although these preliminary findings appear positive, additional data collection and analysis are necessary to evaluate this approach's impact on achievement of expected outcomes. Hence, it is offered here as a resource for course development and an alternative instructional mode for those who are concerned about how to achieve cognitive goals and still have adequate time for the development of related performance skills.

CONCLUSION

Ineffective oral communication skills training in K-12 has resulted in college and university students who are inadequately prepared to compete in our information society (Guidelines, 1991). Although basic public speaking course instructors are primarily responsible for training undergraduate students in public speaking skills, not enough time is spent focusing on students' oral performance. Thus an interactive approach, where students are introduced to public speaking theory outside the classroom through audiotaped lectures and reading assignments, and spend a majority of class time engaging in oral communication activities, provides

instructors with adequate time to cover course content. This approach also gives students the opportunity to practice, develop, and evaluate their oral communication skills.

Because the basic public speaking course remains a vital course for helping students understand the value of effective oral communication and because this course is most students' only exposure to oral communication skills training, an interactive approach provides communication educators with the opportunity not only to meet undergraduate students' oral communication needs and produce more competent oral communicators but also to create an exciting and relevant educational experience.

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