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Basic Course Forum: Advocacy

The Impact of Class Size on the Speech/Time Ratio in the Public Speaking Course

Brent Kice, University of Houston-Clear Lake

Abstract

Authors were asked to prepare an essay as if they were writing a letter to their dean (whose academic training was in another discipline) who (1) asked that enrollment in each basic course section be increased to a level that compromises the pedagogy of the basic course or (2) proposed that the required basic communication course be eliminated from the university's general education program. Here, the author discusses the pressures of increased class sizes. The nature of public speaking requires that class time be divided between instruction and graded student speeches. An increase in allotted time in one area results in a decrease in allotted time in the other. Administrators should consider the impact of the speech/time ratio when increasing class sizes for public speaking courses. The author applies the speech/time ratio to an example public speaking class to reveal approximately 17 minutes in speech time per student for a semester. Instructors face the dilemma of reducing speech assignments or course content.

Dear Dean,

Public speaking requires speakers and audiences. Students must take on both of these roles to benefit from a public speaking course successfully. The public speaking course provides students with unique, beneficial outcomes. For instance, communication is a necessary ability to succeed in a career (Morreale & Pearson,

2005). Employers want new employees to have the abilities to speak with a clear point, establish credibility, and analyze audiences when speaking in various settings in the workplace (Hooker & Simonds, 2015). Students learn each of these skills in the public speaking course, such as constructing concise thesis statements, orally citing sources, and relating speech content to specific audiences. In addition, communication education has a compound effect on student learning in other courses (Morreale & Pearson, 2005). For instance, communication skills improve students' abilities to express themselves in STEM and business courses (Morreale & Pearson, 2005). Public speaking requires students to apply their knowledge in front of a captive audience. Therefore, this essay attempts to explain the use of a valuable resource in the public speaking classroom: time.

A slipping tuition growth in public higher education over the past two years from competition for students and legislative tuition restrictions (Seltzer, 2017) lends itself to administrators increasing course sizes to maximize tuition dollars. From a macro point of view, across the board class size increases may appear to be equitable responses to increase student credit hours per course. However, each course requires unique pedagogical approaches. In the case of public speaking, class size increases drastically alter the use of class time since instructors require graded speeches. On one hand, public speaking instructors lecture and lead various discussions or in-class activities. On the other hand, students deliver and critically listen to speeches in class. An increase in allotted time in one area results in a decrease in allotted time in the other area. It should be noted that the teaching of critical listening is essential for audiences to avoid being swayed by artful speakers lacking evidence, especially regarding matters of public interest (Floyd & Clements, 2005). Administrators should consider the impact of the speech/time ratio when increasing class sizes for public speaking courses.

While public speaking classes vary in the number of assigned in-class speeches, a typical class requires three to five speeches that tend to be associated with an introduction speech, an informative speech, a ceremonial speech, a persuasive speech, or a group speech, as supported by standard public speaking textbooks (Beebe & Beebe, 2017; Griffin, 2015; Lucas, 2015). This essay assumes a middle ground of four in-class speech assignments for applying the speech/time ratio as an example.

Therefore, a 2-minute introductory speech, a 5-minute informative speech, a 4-minute ceremonial speech, and a 6-minute persuasive speech total 17 minutes per student for a semester. In a typical 50 minute three-day-a-week course, this would

mean the addition of every three students totaling 51 minutes would take an entire class period of instruction away from the course. Therefore, a public speaking class that has its size increased from 20 students to 29 students would lose an entire week (three 50-minute class periods) of class instruction, thus severely diluting the course content.

The example provided in this essay demonstrates that every nine-student addition could equate to one less week of in-class instruction, with class sizes of 40, 50, or more severely impacted by the speech/time ratio. Wright (2017) suggested that when faced with increasing class sizes in business communication courses, instructors reduced the amount of writing assignments. If the amount of time allotted for instruction becomes too low, instructors would need to reduce the amount of time allotted to speeches. Once done, instructors reduce the integrity of the course's pedagogical design. This response is natural, given an instructor's need to balance workloads; however, such a reduction in speech-based assignments reduces students merely to learning about course material as opposed to applying course material through speech performance. While an administrator could call for a reduction in speeches to accommodate an increase in cap size, such a reduction in speeches would result in a reduction in content application, depriving students of experiential opportunities. In turn, the benefits of a public speaking course addressed in this essay would be reduced greatly.

The integrity of class instruction contains exponential benefits for students throughout their college careers as well. For instance, well-designed public speaking courses result in lowering students' public speaking anxieties (Hunter, Westwick, & Haleta, 2014). In addition, due to the experiences of personal sharing via various in-class speeches, students in public speaking courses develop a heightened sense of connection, or homophily, with their fellow classmates, which leads to a greater sense of connection to the university community (Broeckelman-Post & MacArthur, 2017). A reduction in anxiety and greater university connection contribute to broader university retention efforts.

The uniqueness of a public speaking course means that an increase in class size begets a decrease in speech time. In addition, a negative relationship exists between class size and student final grades (Kokkelenberg, Dillon, & Christy, 2008), student performance based on in-class assignments (Arias & Walker, 2004), and perceived student learning based on course evaluations (Bedard & Kuhn, 2008; Chapman & Ludlow, 2010). While some schools adopt lab models incorporating large sections of lecture with smaller labs for speech time, this model is not applicable to schools

lacking resources or graduate teaching assistants to do so. How far are administrators willing to push the speech/time ratio?

Author Information

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