



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: REDUCING COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

When Aaron entered the classroom on the first day, he immediately joined his buddies and headed for the back of the small lecture hall. Just as he began to settle down with the normal gear (the overstuffed backpack and mandatory caffeine), he spotted my welcoming message projected on the huge screen in the front of the room. Unfortunately for Aaron and his friends, I asked the students to sit in the first three rows. Aaron's body language reflected his disapproval. He wasn't alone; it was speech class after all.

On the second day of classes, I entered the classroom prepared to introduce the first speaking assignment—the introduction speech. Breaking down the assignment into its components, did not appear to be problem for Aaron. Following all the explanations, we had a review session where I emphasized how placing keywords on a note card would help in maintaining the structure and remembering content, especially when you one is anxious. I reminded students to practice their speech, using their note card. I ended the class with the usual, "Are there any questions?" But, of course, there were no questions.

Aaron appeared to be following along. He took notes. He even recalled the lecture for his peers. His notes appeared to be thorough enough. I left class confident the major components of the assignment had been covered.

Later that evening, as my husband and I sat quietly watching television, I kept my cell phone within reach. Sure enough, about 8:30 p.m., the student emails commenced. After several emails my husband asked, "What's that pinging noise?" I explained that it was students sending me all their last-minute questions about their speeches that were due the next day—questions they would not ask in class. The questions were fairly common, "What is an attention-getter?" "Can I bring my pet ferret?" and "Do I have to have a visual aid?"

The questions continued until 10:55 p.m. Just as I was ready to head to bed, I received the same email three

times in two minutes from Aaron. He only asked one question. In all capitals he screamed, "WHAT DO I PUT ON MY NOTECARD?"

My experiences with students like Aaron were becoming all too common. While I could attribute Aaron's behavior to a number of factors, there was no doubt I needed to change my approach. I began to seek new methods of preparing students for this speaking assignment. Whatever approach I initiated, I knew I wanted it to address one of core the issues I had identified in my students—communication apprehension.

Communication apprehension among college students is well documented. It has been my experience that the major of my students enrolled in the basic speech course struggle with communication apprehension. Over the years I have tried various methods to reduce communication anxiety in my students with mixed results. I require my students to complete their introduction speech within the first week of the course because I believe it reduces anxiety. Still, some students have anxiety so high that they will drop the class rather than give the speech, knowing they will have to take the course again eventually and be successful if they wish to earn their degree.

New Assignment

To combat this issue, I developed an introduction speech assignment that brings collaborative learning to the public-speaking setting. The introduction speech is especially troublesome for students who fear talking about themselves and standing in front of their room solo. To overcome these initial fears, students work in dyadic teams, where they are guided through a process to gather information on a classmate. Information gathered serves as preparation for delivering a two- to three-minute introduction speech. Students then deliver their speeches as a team.

Structure and Content

Students are provided with a handout that offers guidelines for content and structure of the speech. In the introduction, students are to include: an attention-getter;



name, hometown, year in school, and major/career ambition of the classmate; and a preview of the main points.

In the body of the speech, students are to select five items from a list of items such as an unusual personal experience, a social custom of your culture, a family tradition, a holiday, a favorite author, an object that describes you, an animal that describes you, etc., and include transitions.

In the conclusion, students are to provide a review of main points and end with a concluding statement. The structure is simplified to help reduce anxiety.

Visual Aid

Students are required to use a visual aid. To help them understand the structure of the speech, I teach students to develop a concept map. The concept map then can be used as the visual aid for the speech. Working on the concept map serves to harness some of the students' nervous energy.

Delivery

Students present their speeches as a team. One student delivers a speech about his/her peer, as the teammate holds the concept map (visual aid) to assist the speaker. The students seem to gain confidence with the mere presence of a peer in front of the room. This duo approach serves as a transition to the informative speech where they are solo in front of the audience.

Results

Student feedback about this assignment has been very positive. Specifically, students appreciated the collaborative approach to the assignment. Working with a partner reduced anxiety as it provided an avenue for students to express their concerns. Students also liked the concept maps which they indicated helped them understand the content and structure of the speech, in addition to reducing their anxiety.

Unintended Outcomes

Having students complete at least a rough draft of the concept maps in class provided an extra benefit of collaborative learning. Collaboration was obvious as students organized their materials for their maps.

In the past, I would lecture over the assignment, seek questions, and then send students on their way. It never failed that students, much like Aaron, would then wait until the last night to start emailing me their questions. The collaborative learning associated with this introduction speech assignment almost totally reduced the pinging of my phone the night before the speech. Students asked their questions in the classroom.

Debriefing

Once everyone has completed the assignment, I ask students to assess their current anxiety level versus their anxiety level before the speech. Obviously, some students are still somewhat anxious; however, most report a reduction in anxiety. Students also reported that their understanding of the process, in addition to working with a peer, assisted them in gaining confidence in their speaking abilities.

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