



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## GIVING SHY SPEAKERS THE STRENGTH TO GET UP AND DO WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

### A Problem

I have taught introductory public speaking to 1,979 students at my college since 2003. Most of these students came to class with some performance anxiety but eventually sailed through the course successfully. Some needed direct personal attention and encouragement from me along the way, especially in the first few weeks; I offered, and they accepted. Others, however, showed up for just a class or two and then silently disappeared. This has long troubled me.

Certainly, some of these individuals vanished as a result of personal problems and other external obstacles blocking their way. Many others departed, however, at least partly because they did not feel comfortable approaching me with questions whose answers could have buoyed their confidence and cultivated the skills they needed. Because of their shyness, they fell behind their classmates in understanding what we were doing as a group and entered a terminal downward spiral.

### An Epiphany

For some reason, not long ago I was reflecting on the fact that part of human nature is for everyone to feel most at ease with people who resemble themselves. Suddenly a corollary occurred to me: Today's shy students might gain the will to persevere from someone other than a supernannuated graduate degree-holding professional educator like me. And who might be this source of strength? Why not a collection of successful previous students?

My next question was how to exploit my realization. Fortunately, I have retained the email addresses of almost all my past students—at least, the addresses they gave me when we were in class together. Several times a year I distribute an email message of some sort to all of them. Many write to me on their own from time to time, too, with updates on their lives, goals, and careers.

So this fall I dispatched an email message to everyone on my "former students" distribution list:

Dear Folks:

You've made important decisions and gone in interesting directions since studying public speaking. Would you answer questions from future students or visit our class as a guest speaker to share what you've learned and done? If so, please send me an email message with your response(s) to these statements. [You may check both options if you wish.]

I'd be willing to receive email messages from future public speaking students in which they ask questions about the class.

I'd be willing to visit a future class session—at a time and for a period that meets my needs—to talk about my experiences in the class, my experiences as a student at CPTC, my career development after studying at CPTC, or some other topic.

The result? Fifteen of my best former students, from as long ago as 2006, have volunteered as charter members of the Public Speaking Resource Corps (PSRC). I have established a special free group gmail account for the PSRC and let this quarter's students know that they can write to that address any time with questions about our class. Following is an example of an interchange this last month:

Dear former CPTC public speaking students:

I'm taking Dr. Venditti's course this quarter and have something to ask you about the class. Here it is. I'm not very nervous about the actual presentation, but I am worried about the topics. I'm not familiar with many details of politics or history, especially both. I have heard that our group presentation will be just that. I don't want to sound like I'm bored with my own material. Help...



WoW!!! Great question—truthfully it’s a hard topic for me also. I’m not very confident in the amount of knowledge I know about history and politics. Chances are half of the students won’t be either. Therefore, any facts that you provide will be interesting and new. I would add quotes, and maybe research some playful jokes about politics or history (that’s not offensive) to lighten the mood.

Keep in mind that even if you’re not confident, as long as you exude confidence in your frame, gestures, and tone you will come off interesting and appealing to others; no one can tell the difference. (Fake it till you make it :) ) Incorporate visuals in your presentation as well, everyone loves visuals. All of these suggestions should help you be successful in your project. GOOD LUCK!! You will do great :) )

P.S. Sometimes what you feel is difficult is a worse task for someone else. You will be surprised how many people will come to you and say you did well. I can tell you will because you’re asking for help.

In addition to this response, the student told me she received five other email messages within 24 hours of sending her message to the PSRC. Partly because of the reassurance conveyed in those messages, she is still a part of our class.

Beyond their willingness to answer email questions, the 15 PSRC members have expressed a willingness to visit our classes in person. This quarter, for starters, four will serve as guest panelists for our public speaking classes to offer face-to-face observations and valuable advice to current students.

### **The Benefits**

The most obvious positive outgrowth of our Clover Park Technical College Public Speaking Resource Corps in the few weeks since it took shape is that at least one student feels calmer and more prepared to stick out the challenges ahead of her as a public speaking student. This is perhaps a small accomplishment, but each student counts. Every lost student represents a failure sustained and shared by that individual, the instructor, and the institution.

On a broader basis, I believe that further benefits may accrue when a two-year college establishes a corps of alumni asked specifically to assist students in challenging courses. Some will go directly to the members of the corps, others to the college.

First, corps members will likely appreciate having their knowledge and achievements recognized. Second, they may experience an enlarged sense of loyalty and attachment to their *alma mater* as they share their knowledge. Third, they may be able to cite

their membership status as an example of enlightened community service when they seek or upgrade employment.

A college itself may also gain increased stature in its surrounding community as members of a corps inform friends and colleagues of their involvement in the group. And, much as it does from advisory committees for professional-technical programs, a college may derive useful information about current economic, social, and cultural developments from corps members.

For college instructors, using a tool such as the PSRC may act as a reminder of the endearing ideas, idiosyncrasies, unique qualities, and potential displayed by each of the students they encounter. Simply reminiscing on this flow of humanity may intensify one’s dedication to teaching and to helping future students learn and grow.

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