



Strategies To Improve Students' Presentation Skills

By Brenda Hayden Sheets and Lou Tillson



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Brenda Hayden Sheets Brenda.sheets@murraystate.edu is an Assistant Professor, Department of Management, Marketing, and Business Administration, College of Business and Public Affairs, Murray State University. *Lou Tillson* is an Associate Professor, Department of Organizational Communication, College of Business and Public Affairs, Murray State University.

Abstract

Research on oral communication apprehension reveals a significant number of individuals are affected negatively by this phenomenon. Because apprehension is learned and reinforced by experience, the theoretical assumption is that it may be reduced by appropriate training strategies. The major purpose of this paper is to identify a few possible reasons for many students' inability to effectively deliver presentations and to discuss five training strategies designed to help students develop a proficiency in the area of oral presentation delivery.

Introduction

Although collegiate business communication educators have embarked upon a new century exploring technological advanced forms of communication via the Internet such as "pod casting" and "blogging," they also must continue to grapple with the age-old problems of (1) improper grammar, usage, and mechanics, (Sheets, 2004; McCannon and Crews, 1999); (2) poorly written forms of business correspondence often characterized by inadequate planning and organization (Strunk and White, 1959; Dauwalder,2000; Scott, 2001), and/or (3) deficient oral presentation skills (Reece,1999; Bippus and Daly,1999; Hoff and Tian, 2005). Thus, because each of these fundamental problems can often thwart students' mastery, not only courses in business communication, but also in other academic disciplines as well, further discussion about strategies devised to improve students skills in any one of these three areas of communication is merited in today's literature (Krizan, Merrier, and Jones, 2005). This paper focuses on the third communication problem noted above—deficient oral presentation skills--and its purpose is to address: (1) a few possible reasons for students' inability to effectively deliver presentations and (2) training strategies designed to help students develop a proficiency in the area of oral presentations.

While one of the authors recently observed a number of business classes over a period of four semesters, she recorded the manner in which more than 75 business students delivered class presentations and the reactions of their peers to the presentations. Based on her observations, several of the following questions came to mind regarding students' competency levels when speaking before their peers:

- What actions may be taken by college administrators and faculty to address students' weak communications skills and to implement appropriate, corrective strategies to lessen the communications problem?
- For the majority of student oral presenters, why do they fail to stimulate the listeners' interest in the topic?
- Why do many students appear to lack organization and a mastery of subject knowledge?
- Why do they read directly from their notes or PowerPoint slides?
- Why do they fail to establish rapport with the audience?

Unsurprisingly, the author noticed students in the audience seemed bored and passive as they occupied themselves by scribbling, sleeping, or day dreaming. Although there was no means to scientifically measure the audience's comprehension level of the content delivered or the speakers' ability to effectively communicate the subject material, it appeared that the majority of these presentations were of minimal benefit to anyone in the class.

Potential Explanations of Students' Poor Oral Presentation Performance

The inability to effectively deliver oral presentations may stem from a communication-related anxiety known as oral communication apprehension. McCroskey (1977) defined this broad-based anxiety as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (p.78). The fundamental components of oral communication apprehension, according to McCroskey, are learned helplessness and learned negative expectations (Seligman, 1975), both of which may contribute to an increase in anxiety and loss of self-confidence and, consequently, negatively affect one's action to engage in oral communication, whether the mode of communication is speaking face-to-face, in a meeting, among several persons in a group discussion, or to an audience by delivering a presentation or speech.

Data from research have indicated that the oral communication apprehension may be considered a normal response shared by persons when confronted with a forced need to communicate in public. A survey of 2,543 male and female adults conducted by Bruskin Associates (1973) reported that speaking before a group was the primary fear among Americans. Data gathered over an eight-year period from nearly 20,000 students at Michigan State University, Illinois State University, and West Virginia University indicated that between 15 and 20 percent of students suffered from oral communication apprehension encounters (McCroskey, 1977).

The apprehension of speaking before a group of individuals remains a problem in the twenty-first century. According to Krannich (2004), the fear of delivering a speech or a presentation ranks as the number one fear among most people, including students as well as adults from many diverse backgrounds. The author notes that the fear of speaking in front of a group weighs as one of the principal reasons why thousands of employees in the United States decline job promotions. Krannich explains that the acceptance of a new position often requires promoted individuals to deliver a speech or presentation to their newly assigned supervisor(s) and departmental co-workers. The author implies that these employees surmise that forgoing the apprehension of speaking before their peers in an oral communication setting outweighs the advantage of accepting a higher-ranking position in their organization.

According to Phillips (1968), a factor contributing to poor communication performance may lie in one's memory of his or her parents misusing language to ventilate grievances, berate one another, or verbally harass family members, including oneself. As the person developed and matured, these negative experiences may have led the individual to be fearful or reticent of communication dialog, resulting in withdrawal from oral communication encounters.

Because the fear of participating in oral communication activities is learned or reinforced by experience, a theoretical assumption is that one's apprehension may be reduced by appropriate training. In 1998, the National Communication Association directed Roper Starch Worldwide, a national polling firm and research organization, to conduct a telephone survey to learn how Americans felt about the role of schools in training students to improve their communication skills. The study included a national sample of 1,100 Americans over 18 years of age. According to the report, "How Americans Communicate," respondents believed schools were primarily responsible for adequately training students in communication skills. While 41 percent believed their schools had sufficiently prepared them to speak in face-to-face dialogues, only 25 percent felt their school training had properly taught them to deliver presentations or speeches. In response to how well they thought schools were teaching today's students in face-to-face communication situations, approximately 21 percent thought students are well prepared, while only 15 percent believed current students are properly prepared for delivering oral presentations or speeches.

Strategies To Improve Students' Presentation Skills

There are many avenues through which colleges and universities can improve students' performance of delivering class presentations (Gallo, 2006). With the full support of the institutions' administrators, curriculum could be revised to include a set of oral communication requirements for all classifications of students and disciplines. In addition, all existing courses should be modified to include more oral communication assignments. Professors of speech communication could intensify their research in communication apprehension to devise training strategies that would significantly diminish students' fear to speak in front of groups. Faculty in all college disciplines could be strongly encouraged to attend workshops hosted by educators who have developed successful oral communication programs in education settings throughout the country.

There are several guidelines commonly used in such workshops and implemented in many college communication courses to help students become better oral communicators. The first one is that a professor keep in mind that the classroom communication behavior influences students' communication behavior. The professor serves as a viable role model. If students' presentations are to be lively, well-organized, and engaging, then the professor's daily lectures must be!

Second, it is essential that the professor provide clear expectations regarding format, content, and delivery. To address format issues, one must be sure to explain the purpose of the presentation (e.g., informative, persuasive, demonstrative), the time frame (e.g., 5-7 minutes, 10-15 minutes), and the type of audio-visual aids that are required (e.g., hand-made posters vs. professional-looking PowerPoint slides). To address content issues, the professor should clearly explain what the audience members should learn from listening to the presentations and the types of supporting evidence that should be used (e.g., statistics, examples, case studies, testimony), as well as the need to include descriptive language (e.g., emotional appeals, repetition, simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole). Finally, for delivery issues, the instructor must emphasize the importance of vocal variety, hand gestures, facial expression, and eye contact. To help students deliver more engaging presentations, the

professor could require an extemporaneous delivery, which requires advance preparation, but utilizes only limited notes during the speech. If it is not in print in front of the student, then it can not be read, hopefully resulting in improved eye contact with the audience.

Third, an instructor should assign a grade to the speaking assignment by use of a rubric. A grading rubric is used to clearly indicate the professor's expectations, as discussed earlier. It is recommended that a professor provide the students with a blank evaluation form when making the assignment and discuss each criterion with them.

Fourth, instructors could videotape presentations, at least for one semester. This might yield at least one stellar performance that could be shown to subsequent classes as a model speech. While students watch the presentation, they could critique it using the grading rubric or evaluation form noted above. The students' critiques could foster a good discussion which could further emphasize the professor's expectations. It is worth noting that one should acquire assigned release from the student speaker granting permission for the instructor to use his or her speech as an instructional tool in future classes.

Finally, instructors should tie in-class presentations to actual work-life scenarios, if possible. If students realize that the type of speech assigned for a class mirrors a business presentation, then they are more likely to put effort into making it a strong presentation than if they perceive it to be busy work with little practical application.

Although the above strategies may appear to constitute a precise structure, they are subject to modification and omission at the discretion of instructors. Several factors can assist instructors customizing the strategies to fit the oral presentation skills specifically needed by his or her students. Some that may be considered are the course discipline, its subject, and learning objectives; types of assignments; age and number of students enrolled in a class; instructor's teaching style and personality; and the predetermined extent of required evaluative detail necessary to adequately assess the effectiveness of students' oral presentations.

Regardless the cause of the problem or the remedial training strategy used to improve students' presentations, educators must be accountable in assisting college students to develop competent communication presentation skills. As noted by Parvis (2001), to speak effectively in front of a group is "...a skill that has to be taught to students and needs to be honed throughout college life and into the job market" (p. 44). Winsor, Curtis, and Stephens (1997) surveyed 1,000 human resource managers to determine the most valued contemporary job-entry skills. Their findings included communication skills, specifically listening, public speaking, interpersonal communication, written communication, and the trait of enthusiasm. Indeed, students should have the opportunity and instruction that will enable them to attain these skills and capabilities. If educators' efforts are truly successful, this result will be achieved by not only a few, but a majority of college students.

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