
Using Collaborative Techniques in a Speech Class

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“Collaborating with total strangers was a good way to test out my speech. The guys I was with had good speeches and we worked some problems out so that they would be better speeches....At least I know two people will like and understand what I have to say.”

That comment from a student in my course in Speech (English 240) summarizes the experience of most of the students who participated in pre-speech collaboration.

The speech of introduction in my Speech course gives students their first experience in front of the class. Students can talk about things they find important, and they get a chance to know each other. This is a standard assignment in speech classes, and I have been doing it for years, but I have always felt that the experience was less successful than it ought to be. The technique of collaboration has helped me help students make this introductory speech more successfully.

For years, I have tried to help students over initial difficulties by giving them a clear idea of expectations, providing them guidelines, having them fill out a Personal Inventory form to re-discover their own experiences, and giving them adequate time to prepare. In addition, I have tried to lower fears by not grading the first speech. But I still found three problems

with the first speeches: student anxiety and stage fright over exposing themselves to an unfamiliar group; uncertainty about choice of the anecdote or experience from their life to talk about; and thin, unsubstantial presentations.

This semester, having read Karen Spear's *Sharing Writing*, I began to use the technique of collaborative preparation to overcome most of these difficulties. Students form groups of three, make their presentations orally to this small group, and ask for and receive supportive feedback from them.

As a result, the quality of the speeches has gone up, evidence of nervousness has declined, and students have felt much more confident and positive about their first experience speaking in front of the class. Though Spear's book is about collaboration in the writing process, her ideas work well in helping students to collaborate in preparing speeches. This technique of collaborative preparation helps students more than anything I've found in a long time.

Preliminary Preparation

To prepare for their collaboration, I gave students explicit specifications for their speech (Appendix 1). The assignment was to prepare a 5-minute presentation in which they give background information about themselves and tell an anecdote or experience they have had or explain an important aspect of their life. They then completed a Personal Inventory form (Appendix 2) to review the major events of their lives. At the beginning of the next class, they wrote an outline of a speech to introduce themselves, including the anecdote or interesting aspect of their life. In addition, they read two chapters on audience analysis and on making the first speech, and I lectured briefly on stage fright and how to control it, as well as on my expectations for the course. Thus, by the time they came to the collaborative part of their preparation, the students had already thought about the material several times and had received explicit instruction in several important aspects of speech preparation and presentation.

Collaborative Procedures

The purposes of the following collaborative procedures are to help students shape their presentations by reconceptualizing the form and content of their statements and to gain confidence in speaking frankly about their experiences.

The collaborative process took up one class period. Here are the procedures we followed on the day of the collaboration:

5 minutes:

Freewrite -- At the beginning of the class the students made a journal entry as follows: "Choose something you know about and write down everything you can think of about it (anecdote or aspect for Speech #1)."

3 minutes:

Introduction -- I then explained the purposes of the small group collaboration: 1) to give you practice for Speech #1 (Introduction); 2) To let you get acquainted with the audience; 3) To help you learn to collaborate: give information and get a response, see what got through to our audience, and respond to others' presentations.

3 minutes:

Procedures -- I explained the procedures, showing the following information on a transparency.

Give your speech of introduction

Ask for feedback from your colleagues:

1. Ask for praise, positive feedback (What did you like?)
2. Ask for description (What did you hear as my main idea? What points stick in your mind? One person retells.)
3. Ask for questions (What questions do you have?)
4. Ask for suggestions (Where do I need more information? How should I change the organization?)

3 minutes:

Principles -- I explained the principles, showing the following points on a transparency:

Give your presentation to get practice.

Give your presentation to receive help.

Give friendly collaboration and cooperation.

(Collaborators simulate the larger audience)

Get feedback to help reconceptualize.

Don't defend or respond to the suggestions.

Be sure the product remains your own.

1 minute:

Form Groups -- I had students form groups of three by counting off, then assigned parts of the room for them to meet, and told them to give each person 10 minutes — 5 for their presentation and 5 for feedback.

30 minutes:

Group Meetings -- (10 minutes for each of the three persons in the group.) This was the heart of the session. The classroom buzzed for thirty minutes.

5 minutes:

Freewrite -- At the end of the class the students were asked to make a final journal entry. They wrote for five minutes on "How collaborating helped me compose my introductory speech." I emphasized the idea of reconceptualizing the speech.

30 seconds:

Final Word -- Just before dismissing the class, I commented that the

keys to effective oral communication are preparation and practice with a live audience. "Ask others to help you prepare," and "Form part of a mutual support group," I said.

Evaluation

The speeches that students produced as a result of these procedures were superior to those of any previous class. The subject matter of most of them was extremely personal and confidential, yet the students spoke without hesitation and without either boasting or embarrassment about their successes and failures in life. They spoke confidently, gave pertinent details, and made trenchant generalizations. And although all of them confessed to having been nervous, they showed few signs of nervousness — fewer signs than students who had not collaborated with a small group of peers. Perhaps most significant is the fact that these procedures helped students see that I took this assignment seriously and expected them to do so as well. As one student put it, "Nobody blew it off."

As encouraging as my observation of their success was, I believe that the comments from the students reveal the importance of this collaboration even more pointedly. Here is a sampling of remarks from the final 5-minute freewrite at the end of the class period. I think that they speak with the authentic voice of students who are involved in fruitful collaboration.

"The girls I worked with ... seemed to be interested in some of the things I was saying and had some encouraging things to say rather than discouraging me because of my major as so many others do. I feel much better about my speech now and feel that the confidence I have gained from collaboration will make my speech even better."

"It helped me to see what others thought about what I was planning on saying in my speech."

"It was good to see them interested and to respond to what I had to say. . . . Now I can go over my speech again and improve upon it."

"I can go up to the podium now and I will also know two more people and feel a little more comfortable. I think collaboration helps bring out the good points and the bad points of the speech so you know what to expand on and what you should dismiss."

"Collaboration has helped my speech tremendously. I hear the good part such as the story itself. . . . I am going to rearrange my story so that it is one story instead of two. . . . I am a lot more relaxed now about the speech than before. Maybe because I know two new people."

"It helped — I'm not nervous anymore because the group next to us was silent while I was speaking and it was kind of like I was talking to them too. . . . I think it was a great idea to do this. Thank you."

For the Future

I think that in the future I will give students more opportunities for collaboration. What I have used so far is a highly compressed and simplified form of Spear's procedure; in fact, I used a whole semester's worth of ideas in one class. As I implement more of the ideas that Spear outlines, I will give students handouts that describe the tasks that groups are to perform and give them space to write down the results.

This collaborative technique promotes involvement by students, both as speakers and as hearers. Thus instead of indifference, casual approval, passive affirmation, or boredom, the collaborative technique helps to build active participation and commitment to achieving the aims of the course. That is an important harvest for a few days' labor on my part and a few minutes' collaboration on the students' part.

As another student wrote, "This is a good method of easing our minds about being nervous — Keep it."

I plan to keep it.

Appendix A

Instructions for a Speech of Introduction

The Assignment

Present a 5-minute speech to the class. Include the following kinds of information:

1. General information

Name, home town, current residence

Year, major

Interests, hobbies

Work experience

2. Anecdote

A story about yourself that reveals an important aspect of your life or your personality.

Or

3. An Interesting Aspect of Your Life

A description of something about you that reveals an important aspect of your life or personality.

How to Prepare Your Speech of Introduction

To prepare for this speech, complete the attached questionnaire. Freewrite about several anecdotes and aspects of your life. Talk about your experiences with a classmate, roommate, or friend. Discuss them with the instructor.

Work especially on the second part of the speech, the anecdote or interesting aspect of your life.

List your points, but do not write out the speech.

Practice your presentation once

How to Present Your Speech of Introduction

When your turn comes, walk naturally to the front of the class.

As you are walking up, take a deep breath to gain control of your breathing.

Write your name on the board.

Scan the audience.

Present your speech simply and directly, in a conversational tone.

Present your speech without notes.

When you are finished, scan the audience again.

Ask "Are there any questions?"

Appendix B

How to Prepare for a Speech of Introduction

Personal Questionnaire

In your journal, answer these questions to prepare for your first speech. This process ought to take a total of two hours or more.

Part 1. Lists

List five things you know a lot about. Select each from a different aspect of your life.

List the jobs you have had at any age.

List unusual experiences you have had: travel, work, personal, family. Think of things that are different from what others have done. Service to a community; being a stranger in a foreign land; close friendship with a person from a different country; experience with children, elderly people, animals; difficulty you have overcome.

List things you are good at. List as many as you can. Think of using your hands, using your body, using words, using your senses, using numbers, intuition, analytical thinking, originality, helpfulness, artistic ability, leadership, follow-through.

List things that are different about you: being left-handed; being a twin; being foreign-born.

List several people that were important in your life. Think of people outside your family. List turning points in your life. List things you have done this year for the first time.

List things that play an important part in your life: music, art, animals, sports, games, courses, reading interests.

List the careers you have considered.

Part 2. Brainstorm.

Go back through your notes and select one item in each category. Write out a brief statement about each one.

Select three of the topics you wrote about. Explain each one in five minutes. Do this out loud, then write it out. Think of as many details as you can that will help communicate your experience to others in the class.

Part 3. Organize

Select one topic for your speech of introduction. List the items you will mention. Create a design for your speech by putting these items in the order you will mention them. Continue your preparation by asking for peer response, practicing aloud, adding material, and revising your plan.

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