

CTX, “Teaching Learning Community: In and Beyond the Classroom:
Exploring Creative Strategies to Improve Retention”

Final Project Report
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Improving Speaking Abilities
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Last year, a student in an Encore class dropped out of the class because he had difficulty hearing me, and I’ve also had audience members in other public settings comment that I’ve been hard to hear. In other classes, students have asked in the past that I slow down my speaking rate. Thus, I decided to work on improving my speaking abilities for this TLC Project in order to improve my personal retention rates of students in class. In doing so, I hoped to identify resources that might be of assistance to other faculty as well.

Literature on public speaking in the classroom understandably often focuses on lecturing (Brown and Race), and information on speaking skills for faculty is often boiled down to lists of dos and don’ts: move around the classroom, make eye contact, be expressive, avoid distracting mannerisms (Lucas and Murray 62).

To move beyond these formulaic suggestions, I met with Terri Reherman, who teaches speech and communication at San Juan College. Terri helped me identify specific issues based on feedback from others that I wanted to work on. For example, I found that when I had strong emotions around a topic, I naturally dropped my voice. Thus, this issue had particularly surfaced in classes where I was passionate about the topic, such as my “Peace in America” class. Terri suggested paying attention to using volume to spike attention and to work on speaking from the diaphragm. For specific vocal practice, Terri suggested audio recording myself. Knowing that I wanted to focus on vocal delivery, textbook resources from Terri identified pertinent aspects of delivery, including volume, pitch, rate, pauses, vocal variety, and pronunciation and articulation (O’Hair et al. 257-263).

Media Services has a digital recorder available for check-out, and I was able to practice these skills. This semester, I don’t have any classes with appropriate lectures, as I am teaching two online classes and one discussion oriented class, so I asked for feedback on a presentation at my church. Although the purpose of the talk was different, I was speaking about historical figures, and some of the content was material I have covered in class. Kate Leach of the SJC math faculty conducted the observation for me. I also recorded the presentation so that I could review my voice.

Kate and I found that I was able to project my voice using my diaphragm, but in doing so, I tended to raise my pitch and to speed up. Kate also observed that I dropped my voice at times when I looked at my notes. As I had practiced this presentation, I rarely looked at my notes, but when I did, Kate observed that I slowed down. Kate and I also brainstormed how speaking in different settings changes—how I might speak more slowly in an academic setting where I’m choosing my words carefully to ensure objectivity, for example.

I was able to compare this recording to previous class lectures that I have recorded for podcasting. I found that I was much more at ease when I wasn't working on my projection, and that my class lectures were much slower and focused.

My conclusion from the evaluation is that in seeking to improve one speaking skill (projection), I need to maintain awareness of others (rate, pitch). I know that I can continue to monitor my speaking skills, and I can periodically record material to see how my skills have changed.

In working on my own speaking skills, I have identified several resources that may be of use to other faculty.

Harvard University's Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning has an excellent video entitled "The Art of Teaching: Theatre Techniques for Classroom Presentations." This is available as a DVD, with a running time of 42 minutes, or as streaming video in seven parts, online at <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58703/houfek1.html>. In the video, Nancy Houfek, Head of Voice & Speech, American Repertory Theater at Harvard, leads a group of faculty members through a workshop in which she applies theater techniques to the classroom. Houfek is quick to point out that good teaching is not reduced to technique, but she views the whole body as a medium for good teaching. The video builds on research which emphasizes the power of non-verbal communication, and she walks faculty through a process of "landing energy" in a classroom and naming an objective for the class, which enables faculty to tap into their passions for the subjects that they are teaching. Thus, the emphasis of this approach is not on faculty performance but on student reactions to the ideas presented. The video also addresses practical concerns such as stage fright, the physical activity of speaking, the pleasure of language, and the use of metaphors to address different learning styles. Houfek boils down information to easily remembered phrases, such as "Stand up straight and breathe," but she expands on these seemingly simple dictums by demonstrating and applying these to faculty members in the videotaped workshops. I highly recommend this video, and I would be interested in viewing it with others to work on applying these techniques.

A second resource that I investigated was the idea of video-recording lectures. This is emphasized repeatedly in literature on classroom engagement (Davis 118; McKeachie and Svinicki 350). San Juan College's Media Services has equipment available on request, and Media Services will set up a camera and then provide a DVD for viewing. Video-recording is an integral part of many faculty skill-building programs. Research shows, though, that faculty often focus on negative aspects of their teaching styles or quirky mannerisms, sometimes obscuring other important aspects of the presentation (McKeachie and Svinicki 350). The value of video-recording is often in viewing the material with others and receiving constructive feedback (Myers; McKeachie and Svinicki 350). In my own audio-recording experience, I was much more critical of myself than the observer, and I found it extremely useful to talk through this experience. I would like to see support for having classes videotaped and then viewed with an appropriate faculty member or staff member.

I also investigated opportunities for developing speaking abilities. Public speaking classes are available at SJC; they often emphasize developing content and organization, as is appropriate for an undergraduate class, but they do address delivery as well.

Farmington has a Toastmasters group, which helps professionals from all fields develop public speaking skills. I attended a Toastmaster meeting, and I found that this could be a potentially useful group for someone wanting positive opportunities to practice speaking skills. The Toastmaster philosophy emphasizes constructive evaluation in a safe, fun environment. Members

begin by working through a series of ten speeches, given on topics of their own choosing. Toastmasters provides a workbook, giving extensive guidelines for each speech, covering topics such as organization, vivid words, using the whole body, vocal variety, research, visual aids, inspiring others, and entertainment. The workbook is a detailed, substantive resource. After completing these first ten speeches, members can continue to work on specific skills as they desire, including storytelling, interpretive reading, leading discussions, and technical presentations. One of the key components of Toastmasters is receiving feedback from others who are also developing their skills, so members vote on the different components of each meeting. The structure of the meeting included prepared presentations which members had agreed to do in advance as well as short, impromptu “table topics,” covering, in this meeting, thought provoking ideas such as “Is God male or female?” Participants reported that table topics are often lighter but still engaging. The meeting I attended provided constructive feedback for all those who participated in an enjoyable setting. It’s worth noting that dues for the organization are minimal: currently a \$20 new member fee to cover the cost of the workbook, and \$27 for six months to cover the cost of receiving a Toastmaster magazine. The Farmington Quality Toastmaster group currently meets on Mondays at 11:45 at the San Juan College Quality Center for Business. Current contacts for the group are Jasper Welch (welchj@sanjuancollege.edu), Lewis Campbell, and Joan Clark.

Overall, this project has given me the opportunity to learn more about aspects of speaking to a group and to practice skills. Because of the nature of my classes this semester, I do not expect to see any impact on student retention in my classes this semester, but I hope to see these skills improve class engagement in courses in the future. Improving my own skills is not a simple matter of “fixing” one area of concern, but being aware of my total presentation and communication. The topic of speaking skills for faculty has enormous potential for additional development. I would like to see programs that partner with speech and theatre faculty in order to develop workshops or symposia presentations, and perhaps a formal speech-coaching program for faculty. I would also like to see a structure for faculty to videotape our classrooms and view these with a trained professional in order to obtain constructive feedback. There is also tremendous potential to continue to explore how speaking skills can be developed specifically in a learning college environment.

Works Cited

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