Teaching Public Speaking Online

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I teach public speaking Online using PowerPoint audio, and it has proven to be as effective in developing speaking skill as building-based public speaking classes, if not better. It is much like radio communications, and with students uploading one, and sometimes two, audio presentations each week and receiving quick, comprehensive feedback from the instructor and fellow students. Our Online College produces top-quality commencement speakers each year, and graduates have shown the ability to deliver highly effective presentations at work and in the community. I base this comparison on personal observation, student feedback and public speaking achievements by students who have taken the course.

Online and building-based public speaking classes are much the same in several respects. Online students read a posted lecture each week, progress through the textbook chapter by chapter and turn in written assignments. Online students also follow the basic sequence for developing speech topics, creating outlines and writing complete essays. Students present their speeches once a week.

Onsite public speaking classes have proven to be very effective dating back to Classical times, but Online classes can hold their own, and even outperform the onsite classes in some respects. We can list several ways in which Online public speaking classes are different, and arguably better than building-based classes. Students can present speeches at a rate of twice a week in an asynchronous format which enables everyone to hear everyone else's presentation and provide well-thought-out written feedback. Since the presentations are attached on the discussion thread, students can go back and hear any speech more than once throughout the session. All of the speeches are sitting there for anyone to hear at any time. Students get more opportunities to speak Online and receive much more comprehensive feedback from both the instructor and fellow students. In the asynchronous environment, student attendance is much better and communication is several times better. The more you practice, the better you get, and the more feedback you get, the better you get. Both the practice and feedback are more frequent Online. Online public speaking practice is a great skill-developer.

The length of the Online speeches is shorter because of bandwidth constraints, but the Online learning result is the same, if not better. Online students have about twice the number of speaking opportunities that

onsite students ordinarily have, and Online students have the added benefit of developing skill with PowerPoint software and computer audio equipment.

In my system the students use standard pre-writing methods to come up with their topic. Clustering and free writing are the two methods that we've used the most. These are very standard methods that you'll find in any public speaking or composition class. Once they come up with their topic, students organize their material into an outline, starting with an introduction, transitioning into a main body containing five to seven main points, and then transitioning again into a conclusion.

Once the outline is complete, they fill out each section with complete sentences and develop each section into paragraphs. Once they're done, they'll have a speech lasting two to three minutes.

As an optional exercise, I assign each student a section of a chapter and have them summarize that information in five main points, adding an introduction and conclusion. In all textbook exercises of this kind, students include their opinion and personal experience. I like to achieve an equal balance of theory, opinion and personal experience in these exercises.

In my building-based classes, I have all of the students speak at every class meeting, because the key to skill development is getting in as many repetitions as possible. In most building-based public speaking classes, however, the frequency is much less than that.

We stay close to the textbook, The Art of Public Speaking, Edition 8, by Stephen Lucas. This edition includes two CD-ROMs, which are an excellent resource both Online and onsite. The textbook covers the basics of public speaking, including speaking and listening, speech preparation, getting started, organizing and outlining, presenting the speech, and varieties of public speaking. It's an excellent textbook, and we go through it chapter by chapter. I present my weekly Online lessons in Angel Coursework. I prepare them using hypertext markup language (html) and post them as web pages.

The process of posting an audio is much like a mini radio production. Students have their written material and microphones ready. They go to PowerPoint, design their slides

Angel software enables me to present five quizzes, an authentic assessment and midterm and final exams. In their authentic assessment, students evaluate a speech of their choice in writing and attach their own audio presentation.

In Lesson 1, I define communications, explain the technical sequence for using PowerPoint audio and review the basic fundamentals of speaking.

I emphasize to the students that what they are really studying is "professional" speaking. This includes any speaking on the job, whether it be one-on-one in person or in front of a larger group. Professional speaking would also include speaking over the telephone or via another channel such as PowerPoint audio or possibly television.

I advise the students that when we're speaking we should be balanced, relaxed, clear, expressive and pleasant, even on a bad day. I advise them that amateur communicators can be balanced, relaxed, clear, expressive and pleasant on a good day, but on a bad day, they lose their fundamentals.

I tell them that professional speakers are able to maintain a minimum level of professional competence on a bad day. I urge them to observe any professional communicator whom they admire and see how they maintain this level of professional competence every day.

I review several other key points for students to remember in professional speaking:

The volume should be loud enough for the person in the back of the room to hear, but no louder. If we're speaking too loudly into electrical equipment, including PowerPoint, our message will "skew". It will break up and be unintelligible.

The pace should be note-taking speed. If we're transmitting too fast for the message to be received, then it's of no value. It's very important to watch pace when speaking into a microphone or using PowerPoint audio.

Gestures are not significant via PowerPoint, radio or telephone communications. Proper speaking emphasis is very important in the absence of physical gestures.

Emphasis should reflect reasonable business communication. The speaker should emphasize key words and phrases but avoid the use of overly theatrical emphasis at one end or monotone at the other.

Online speakers should visualize the audience listening on their home computers and project to them through the microphone. They should visualize their listeners taking written notes.

When using written notes, Online speakers should watch their pace and use the punctuation to pause and breath. That's one reason why the punctuation is there, for oral presentation. They should try to avoid talking down toward their written notes and, instead, project their voices toward the microphone.

Graphics - Can be very effective using PowerPoint. They can be simple and effective at the same time. It's best to keep them simple so that the server and home computer can handle the message. When in doubt, keep it simple.

Practice is the key. There's no other way to develop skill at speaking than continual practice. We want to develop the correct reflexes under pressure, and the only way to do that is through continual practice, paying close attention to the fundamentals.

Nervousness is an accumulation of energy to get the job done. Later, with practice and experience, the energy is still there but transforms into a kind of enthusiasm. Even at the beginning, nervousness does not show as much as we think.

Regarding style, we all follow the same basic fundamentals, but we all individuals. It is important for us to be ourselves. That is the bottom line.

My assignment for Lesson 1 is typical of the structure of my assignments for the entire course. I ask the students to read Chapter 1 of "The Art of Public Speaking" and use the Review Questions at the end of the chapter as a point of departure to write a 200-word essay providing us with their own view of communications.

I ask them to combine the basic textbook theory with their opinion and personal experience, whenever possible. I want to be able to see the student in the writing. I have them post their essays in the Angel Discussion area and write a short response to at least three of their classmates' essays.

I begin the audio assignments in Lesson 2, asking the students to attach PowerPoint audio presentations to their essays on the discussion thread. I advise them that they can simply read a section of their essay, slowly and clearly into the microphone and keep the length at about a minute.

I continue to post the Coursework lessons each week, using the same html format. In Lessons 3 and 4, I discuss the structure of a formal argument, the basics of deductive and inductive reasoning, and fallacies in logic. The assignments for that week take the students through textbook Chapters 3 and 4, and I ask them to post an audio presentation for each chapter. The process continues in this way throughout the course.

As noted, the length of the audio presentations is about one minute, because the Angel server and the students' home computers can not handle much more than that. Anyone who uses PowerPoint audio will quickly realize that one-to-two minutes is enough time to present a good level of information, and that it

takes time to prepare this type of presentation. In this way, it's very much like radio communications, and I advise the students of this fact.

There is no significant difference between a one-to-two-minute presentation via PowerPoint Online and a four-to-six minute speech in a building-based classroom. The learning effect is the same. The Online experience is arguably more comprehensive because the students learn to use PowerPoint Online and learn to set up and use audio equipment on their computers. In the Online Presentations sequence, students research and prepare their speeches, check the adjustment of their microphone and computer audio settings, create the audio and graphics on PowerPoint and post the completed presentations on the discussion thread. Once this process is completed, they listen to their classmates' audio presentations and read their posted essays. They then post feedback for their classmates, following specific guidelines for evaluating speeches.

Student feedback

I have not conducted any scientific research on the effects of student speaking practice Online at this point, but I do have my own personal observations and feedback from students. Here is a sampling of what the students have said:

"When this class first started, doing the audio presentations was nerve racking for me, but now I am very comfortable doing them. I gained much from this class, and feel more comfortable with preparing a speech. I wish everyone luck in your upcoming classes and hope to work with you again. I enjoyed listening to how everyone improved over the last 7 weeks with their audios. Good luck to all."

"I have gained so much and I will definitely take what I have learned with me. I am more comfortable now with speaking in front of a large group. (I am still nervous, but comfortable) I have learned PowerPoint, which I have been wanting to learn for so long, but I still have a long way to go."

"And what a class it was! The information learned, and the confidence built was far more then I imagined. Not only did I have the chance to enhance my own skills, but I had the opportunity to be a part of everyone's growth. The confidence that came across within these past weeks was apparent just listening to your audio presentations."

"I remember starting this class, I was so nervous and I thought it would be so difficult. Looking back now, I realize how much I have learned in this course and I look forward to using my knowledge in the future."

"I didn't think this class would be as interesting as it has turned out and I think we all would agree with that. I know we were all very nervous 7.5 weeks ago to have to speak in front of each other but I have to say it was really cool doing it Online! I will take a lot away from this particular class with me."

"This class has taught me a lot. Coming into this class I was anxious. The bad kind of anxious. I have never been one to like the idea of speaking in front of people, or to even have to make a telephone call. I am very excited to say that I am walking away from this class with a good understanding of public speaking and a lot of knowledge to be able to prepare and give a speech."

"This has been quite a struggle for me, but I have seen where I have improved some and could probably give a speech if I was absolutely forced into it. Everyone has been great in the comments and help in the discussion threads."

"I really enjoyed this class and feel more prepared to give a speech or even go on an interview. My power point skills have greatly improved and I know I can even improve on them more now."

"Well this has been an eye opener of a class for me. I have grabbed quite a few tips from the weekly topics and applied them into my life at work. I feel more confident after taking this class too."

"When I first started this class I had no idea how this was going to work; a Public Speaking class on the internet? Well here we are at the end of the session and I found out how it was going to work and I enjoyed in very much so. I liked hearing everyone and watching their power point presentation and seeing how people even grew and the class went on. I myself have even seen a difference in my oral presentations."

"I can truly say that I feel I have learned a great deal about public speaking from this course. All of the information tied in well together and came at an appropriate pace. I feel very confident about preparing, organizing, and delivering a speech."

"I really enjoy using PowerPoint and now with the audio that we learned and practiced, I feel like I would be more prepared when making a speech or a presentation."

"This course was a very difficult one for me, but it was very informative. I have really learned a lot about public speaking and speech making."

"My knowledge of public speaking has been enhanced a great deal and now I catch myself analyzing every speech I hear."

"I learned so much from each of you and I had no idea that I would enjoy so many things about the art of public speaking. What I learned is how to get my thoughts in order and present my ideas in a clear way."

"I have learned a lot about speechmaking and I know I will be walking away from this class with a lot of new techniques. I will be able to not only use these techniques here at Bryant and Stratton but in my job and life."

"After taking this class I feel more comfortable talking in public."

"I believe that I have benefited from this class and that I would be able to give a speech and a presentation accurately and with confidence."

"Building on the foundation of research, we came to a peak in public speaking. This class has been very rewarding. Even though I have done presentations in the past, the techniques I have studied will definitely be implemented in my future works. When I go back to see my first power point I laugh at how clueless I was to the technology aspect of visual aids. Now, I am by no means an expert, but can hold my own when needed."

"I am amazed at how each of us has grown with our use and knowledge of PowerPoint. Additionally, we have each grown with our ability to write speeches."

"Well, this class wasn't as bad as I thought it would be and I actually learn a lot that I will one day in a far away galaxy use this information to deliver a speech. It was interesting to see the different power point presentations and hear my classmates' voices."

"I always dread nervousness but after the text it states that the best speakers also are nervous when addressing an audience. At first I knew nothing about doing a presentation and apply sound, I had a difficult time with that sometimes my microphone would not work at all. I learned to stay a certain distance from the microphone so my voice would be clearer."

"I really dreaded the day when this class would be for me to take but now that it is over with it was not so bad after all. In fact I enjoyed it."

"I leave with a better understanding in giving speeches and a better understanding in speaking in general. I love our dissuasions we had every week and the fact that I learned how to use PowerPoint audio, that was really cool. For some reason English is so much easier to take on line then on a college campus."

"The audio presentations we had to do was good practice. I was so nervous at first and thought that I was going to do a bad job. I ended up realizing at the end that I did a good job. I was able to deliver the speech in a quicker manner then in the beginning with fewer mistakes. Also I noticed that I was able to put important information on the slide shows which I was able to narrow down the information. When I did the audio piece I noticed that I did a great job with changing my tones on certain sections which made it so it wasn't boring. I finally realized the way I talk was the way I wrote down the information which made it easier to deliver the audio piece."

As noted, this Online process provides students at least twice the number of speaking opportunities they would otherwise receive in a building-based classroom, and the feedback from fellow students is more comprehensive because it's given more thought and sent in writing..

Over the course of the Online session, students present about 12 of these speeches and provide written feedback to their classmates. It is a very thorough, comprehensive learning process that will serve the students well for both Online and onsite speaking opportunities.