

Improving Student Participation by Georgie Monahan, Professor of Speech

I am quite certain that you enjoy teaching or you would not have been hired to teach at OCC. I am equally certain that you see teaching as a facilitation process—creating a learning environment in the classroom for the students to grasp the material, clarify and question, and hear other’s input. Since I teach oral communication courses, Interpersonal Communication, Public Speaking, and Oral Interpretation, it is important for me to create a context that is somewhat comfortable, realizing that most students have a challenging time in these sorts of classes. The fear factor is too high to begin with, so it is my job to assist in making it less frightening and anxiety-ridden. The specific techniques that I use include various lecture practices and tactics, a complete syllabus & handouts of assignments, and my own experience and knowledge. Those are the areas I intend to develop in this mentoring article. Even though I hail from the Department of Speech Communication and the Literature & Language Division, the following ideas are fairly universal and will give you some confidence as a new member of OCC, some validation about your current practice, and perhaps spark some other approaches that you could take with your classes.

In 1989, I was one of the new kids on the block at OCC. My colleagues were very helpful and volunteered that it can take around 5 years to develop and make a course yours! I think that is not far off and it helps to keep it in mind as you approach your subject area and specific courses. You need to invest time and energy to move effectively through your first year. A lesson plan can help you to gain certainty about what each class session should accomplish and to gain confidence to implement the plan with skill. Create specific objectives for the class. Establish an agenda, create a rationale. Here are some tips for lecturing and involving the students:

1. Lecturing: 7-10 minutes and then seek input from students in some way

- Include some stories for examples and clarification
- Think of rhetorical questions and make note of them
- Read a passage (or have a student read) and dissect it/analyze it

- Keep up with pop culture to incorporate pertinent examples or humor into discussions
- Use multiple media: Text book publisher resources &/or your own overheads, power point, video, the white board, slides, music/audio, models

2. Class Discussion Triggers

- Ask questions—make note of these thoughtful questions in your text or notes—use descriptive and reflective questions, ask them to make comparisons, ask for personal experiences/examples
- Have them turn to a neighbor and consider a question and then share it with the class
- Use role-playing
- Use problem-solving techniques to establish real world application
- Use textbook exercises as well as other resources
- Walk around the class, up & down the aisles, especially when students are doing an assignment
- Use paraphrasing & probing when students respond to your questions
- Provide positive feedback to their contributions

3. Shares

- Create assignments to be shared in class—for example I use the following shares at the beginning of my Interpersonal class, & value them as a part of participation:

You will do a total of 3 shares during the semester that will count toward participation points. Each share must be hand written and completed prior to class. Each share will be a personal experience you have had or have observed another experience including personal, books you have read, movies you have seen. Each share will be linked to a concept the class is currently discussing. Begin your share by stating the concept or theory tell the experience and offer any observations you might have about it.

You will be given the opportunity to “share” at the beginning of each class after I have taken attendance. I will collect the handwritten share in order to record and evaluate it. No written share, no points. Please note on the calendar that week 14 is the final week for shares. If you have met your share quota, you are still welcome to share other experiences.

4. Other ways to “open up” your classes.

- Ask your colleagues for any of their ideas.
- Make sure you check with the text book rep to get all the ancillary materials available that will assist you with the course.
- Plan on using some icebreakers during the first week of class that will give everyone a chance to learn names. Set up a buddy system or trios so students can contact each other for coursework and study group opportunities.

5. Be aware of your own teaching style and be ready to adapt to your audience.

I also want to remind you of the fact that OCC is a wonderfully diverse campus.

Your class will be made up of people from a variety of cultures and co-cultures. We as educators are continually challenged to be mindful. As Julia Woods from Chapel Hill in the field of Speech Communication wrote in The Western Journal of Speech,

Like many white, heterosexual faculty members, I’ve been humbled by the realization that much of my teaching and scholarship has been premised on naïve disregard--even ignorance of the history, identities and perspectives outside of the cultural mainstream. Also like many of my colleagues, I’ve tried to reform my instruction and research to make them more inclusive of a range of people and communicative practices. Perhaps others share my philosophical and pragmatic reservations about emphasizing differences, yet are unable to dismiss compelling arguments that for too long Western culture has been resoundingly racist, heterosexist, classist and Euro-American in organizing social life and representing our common legacy.

It is important to check in with your own assumptions, to analyze your class audience in terms of diversity and adapt to that. Intercultural Communication is a unit of discussion in both my Interpersonal and Public Communication classes. Discussions about ethnocentrism, High & Low Context Cultures, Individualistic and Collectivist Cultures are just a few of the topics that we cover and discuss.

6. Course Syllabus

The primary purpose of a syllabus is to communicate in writing to the student what the course is about, why the course is taught, where it is going and what will be required of the student for course completion. The following should be included in your class syllabus:

- Instructor Information: complete name, office location, office hours (can include a virtual office hour), office phone number & email address.

- Course textbook and any other material requirements.
- Course Description/Objective: a more formal description of what the course is about and your goals and objectives for the students.
- Assignments: a description and value of each assignment in the class for the semester—a separate handout with greater detail should follow with each assignment.
- Class Guidelines: the rules need to be spelled out for class behavior & participation, attendance, make-up exams, deadlines, grading, support & tutoring availability, academic dishonesty.
- Entry Standards: spell out what minimum skills are required to pass the class. Check with your department to see if there are published lists of entrance level expectations and skills that you can share with your students
- Course Calendar: class meeting dates & topics to be covered, reading & written assignments for each class, due dates of projects, test dates.
- Any other information that you deem pertinent to the class.

7. Grading Standards

Students like to know what constitutes an “A”, “B”, “C”, etc. This is what I include in one of my assignment handouts for a Public Speaking class:

The focus will be on 3 major areas when assigning grades. First, an ‘A’ speech is substantive. It develops an original topic and idea that is relevant to the interests and moral sensibilities of your audience. It should be supported by a variety of high-quality researched information and reasoning. Researched information should be cited orally as necessary and appropriate. Second, an ‘A’ speech is well structured, so that it can be easily followed by your audience. Your entire speech should develop your thesis statement and reflect a clear sense of general and specific purpose. It should adhere to the principles of good form, and be developed with an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The main ideas should be developed in accordance with a coherent speech design strategy. Your choice of language and sentence structure should be as simple and clear as possible. Third, an ‘A’ speech is effectively presented, using an extemporaneous speaking style. Note that I do not expect you to look “slick”--just prepared with

an improved confidence. A jittery presentation does not necessarily mean a bad grade so long as you keep forcing yourself to make contact with your audience. If you do this, your presentation skills should improve with every speech. In addition, in an A speech, the details are well polished. All these variables should come together in your presentation. So, to receive an A, you need to excel in all three areas, and this is a challenge.

A 'B' range grade falls short in one major or several minor areas that add up.

A 'C' range grade reflects a lot of time and effort but there are numerous problems that need to be addressed next time.

A 'D' range grade is poor in all three areas and does not impress you as reflecting a lot of work.

An 'F' range speech is not delivered and never made up.

These types of specifics are an important paragraph to include for each project you assign. I also include at least one example of an "A" project that a student completed in a more recent class. (You may also have more on file for any student that wants to come up to your office for more examples.) So, the description + the example(s) + your discussion & their questions should cover the bases for the assignment. Do not be afraid to be redundant—repeating is a good thing!

8. Tests

When it comes to testing, again, spell out the type of tests you will be giving, create study guides and perhaps, provide a sample question or two. Discuss the approaches to good study habits, forming study groups, etc. If time permits, do a review in class. Encourage your students to come and talk to you about any kind of class-related problem they may be having. Make yourself accessible. I think accessibility is an essential ingredient to your teaching success.

9. Your Knowledge/Experience

Regardless of the number of times you have or have not taught the course(s) you will be teaching, your background and past experiences, along with your ability to learn material quickly, will help you navigate along. If your professional background includes organizational experience, I am sure that will become part of the examples and perspective you offer. Your favorite &/or most fascinating area of the course will

undoubtedly be the most fun component to teach. For example, I have found that one of my most enjoyable units is on conflict management. I have done consulting and training for managers and I have been personally working on these skills for me. As a result, I have fun with this area of teaching. It will enhance your credibility as well.

10. Pay attention to your own professional needs

Pay attention to your time management in terms of class preparation and correcting projects & exams. Use your office hour constructively as well as any other office time you take. Stay in touch with your mentor during the first year, and do not hesitate to tune in with your department colleagues. For example, the Speech department is a very synergistic group of people, sharing ideas, approaches, exercises, etc. It is the best kind of support and I am most grateful for all of them—they are a wise and creative group with the student's best interests at heart. Also, because one of the instructors used a sabbatical to create a mentoring guide for part time instructors in our department, that guide is available to anyone who would like to take a look and get more ideas. Just check in with the Division Secretary. If I can be of any kind of help for you, call me and good teaching to you.