

Are Your Students Communicating Effectively?

“If you’re in the presence of a true expert, you will understand everything they say. If you don’t understand what someone is saying, they are not an expert.” – Nido Qubein

As a graduate student going to one of my first conferences, I remember my advisor telling me that if I’d truly mastered my subject I’d be able to talk about it cogently in a variety of settings: in a 1-hour seminar, in a 5 minute conversation at a poster session; and in 2 minutes during a coffee break. As a faculty member watching my students give presentations, that advice comes to mind again. Different formats require different skills. How could I help my students learn to communicate clearly, concisely, and confidently? And how could I help them learn from the presentations of their classmates, so that end-of-semester oral presentations truly were a valuable use of their time?

Establish the goals

For oral presentations at the end of the semester, take 15 minutes of class time 3–4 weeks in advance to talk about them. Lay out some possible strategies; discuss the framework of an effective presentation, and consider demonstrating “good” and “bad” techniques. This list of criteria is adapted from the AACU VALUE rubric on oral communication.

- **Central Message:** What’s the main point? Make it vivid. State it at the beginning and reiterate it at the end.
- **Delivery Techniques:** Engage listeners by making eye contact. Modulate your voice to emphasize what’s important. Don’t read from slides or cards. (Yes, this may require practicing the talk a few times!)
- **Language:** Clearly formed sentences reflect – and convey – a clear understanding of the topic. Use the terminology of the discipline correctly.
- **Organization:** Presentations should be structured in the same way that a good essay might be. Include an introduction and overview of the main points. Separate the presentation into clear sections. Support main points with evidence. Summarize at the end, reiterating the main points.
- **Supporting Materials:** These materials are most credible when they are relevant, link clearly to the topic, and are from reliable sources. Using a variety of supporting materials – a list of examples, diagrams of experiments, data tables, vivid images or quotations – further enhances credibility. Slides are designed to reinforce the organization of the talk, contain an appropriate amount of information, and use visual cues to indicate main ideas, details, and transitions.

Assess the presentations

To keep the student-listeners focused, state your expectations for them as well. Do you want them to ask questions, write a 1-paragraph summary of what they learned from each presentation, or add a list of questions they still have? Have students evaluate the quality of each presentation by answering two questions:

- What did the speaker do in the presentation that was especially effective?
- What might the speaker do differently to enhance his/her presentation?

These two questions will help students reflect on what makes a presentation effective and help them think differently about their own presentations. For maximum impact, compile the responses to the questions and give each student a list of the responses for their own presentation.

Resources:

AACU VALUE rubric for oral communication. Retrieved on 2/8/2017 from <http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/oral-communication>

Sample peer evaluation form for class presentations. (Modify as you like.)
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/6vfhcb2c0icu1th/EvalForm.doc?dl=0>

Abridged from a teaching tip submitted by:
Francine Glazer, New York Institute of Technology