“I Knew That I Was At My Best”
Public Speaking Assignment

Goal: To increase self-awareness, self-confidence, self-disclosure, and motivation.

Many teachers who have students enrolled in introductory communication courses give an initial presentation, which is often personal in nature and ungraded (e.g., the “micro-bio” presentation, the “most unforgettable experience” presentation). About six years ago I began having students give what I call the “I Was At My Best Presentation.” The assignment requires that students prepare and give a five minute narrative describing a time in their lives when they were at their best.

Instructions to Students
1. Tell us about a time in your life when you were at your best. You should select a situation where you were “at your best,” not necessarily when you were the best. This might be in the area of academics, athletics, extracurricular activities, volunteer activities, family relationships, or personal relationships.
2. Sit down at the computer and write a “stream of consciousness” of your story as if you were telling it to your best friend for the first time. Perhaps you could write a letter to a family member or friend. The manuscript is to help you internalize the structure of your story, but will not be used during the actual presentation.

3. When giving this presentation, you are to actually adopt the persona of a storyteller and to tell about your experience narratively. In other words, tell your story, do not just describe what happened.
4. The last line in your presentation must be “... and it was at that moment, I knew that I was at my best.”

Models
Two modeling strategies are particularly effective in enhancing the quality of these presentations.

First, a video tape is played of “I Was At My Best Presentations” given by former students who have taken the course. Occasionally students will adopt a humorous tone and have fun with this presentation, as when Dave talked about beating the 270 pound tackle on the football team in a desert eating contest at the Old World Buffet, or when Collin talked about surviving work on his first shift at Hardee’s. The presentations contained in the video used as an anticipatory set, however, are not humorous in tone, but rather are about hard work, pride, and perseverance. They are about people reaching down and finding things within themselves that they did not know existed. The presentations on this tape are about the natural high.
in life, which are often emotionally powerful and transforming moments.

Michelle spoke of giving her valedictorian address at her high school graduation. “After my last line was delivered and people applauded, I walked back to my seat, I looked over at my parents who were standing up and applauding with tears in their eyes, and it was at that moment, I knew I was at my best.”

Ambika told of visiting her grandfather in the St. Anthony’s Nursing Home and “in the midst of our small talk, Gramps turned to me and said ‘Ami, I don’t want to live anymore.’ How does an inexperienced seventeen year old respond to something like that? I left my grandpa that day feeling scared of what he might do and knowing that it was up to me to give him a reason to live. Four days later, my gramps, my mom, and myself left for the Great North Woods. We went to my grandpa’s cabin; he had not been there in twelve years. We did things we had not done in years: we fished, we swam, we sat on the porch. Two weeks later when we returned to the nursing home, he looked me right in the eye, and all he said was ‘Thank you. I needed that,’ and it was at that moment I knew that I was at my best.”

Justin told us about buying his mother a birthday present. “I went with the standard flowers and a card. Some might ask, ‘that’s the best you’ve ever been?’ But when I presented her with the card and flowers, I accompanied it with the question, ‘Mom what can I give you to show how appreciative I am of you for raising me by yourself?’ She seemed puzzled, so I explained, ‘Mom I want you to know that I am forever in your debt. There’s so much of your life that you have sacrificed for Jason and me. My life has been filled with joy and security that so many other people are deprived of. Most kids don’t recognize the wonderful things a mother does. Please know that no matter what happens anywhere, ever, that I know what you have done for me, even at your expense, and that I love you.’ She told me that all she wanted was for me to be the man she had raised me to be. Few times in my life have I felt better about myself, and it was at that moment I knew that I was my best.”

Second, I give my own “I Was At My Best Presentation.” I was a dialysis patient for thirteen years and had a renal transplant eight years ago. My “I Was At My Best Presentation” focuses on coping with the vicissitudes of chronic illness, the importance of perseverance, and the resilience of the human body and spirit. It is often life’s challenges which bring out the moments when we are truly at our best, and each of us is capable of constructing a presentation, sharing these moments with our students. Just as math teachers can show students how to solve math problems, communication teachers can and should be able to model effective speaking behavior for their students.

**Appraisal**

This assignment has a number of advantages which facilitate the aims of basic course instruction. By requiring students to look within themselves and to think reflectively about the times when they excelled and reached out to other people in their lives, this assignment fosters self-reflection and may enhance levels of self-awareness. Focusing on values such as perseverance, pride, altruism, and compassion are implicitly fostered through this particular speaking assignment.

Competent communication depends on knowledge, skill, and motivation. One type of knowledge is self-knowledge. This assignment requires students to look within themselves and to think reflectively about times in their lives when they were most proud of themselves, the times when they excelled as a result of hard work, the times when they were altruistic and reached out to help other people in their lives. The opportunity to tell other students
about the times when they were at their best may enhance self-esteem.

It is a presentation about which students have a high level of topic knowledge and are quite capable of giving without notes, transparencies, or computer-generated graphics. Thus, the presentation facilitates natural conversation and direct eye contact and is one in which they invariably succeed. The realization that they can actually tell their heroic story without using notes and look at an audience often serves as a good starting point in the process of combating communication apprehension and developing self-confidence.

Instructor and student modeling of presentations which contain a moderate to high level of self-disclosure helps to legitimize self-disclosure as normative behavior in the class. Students realize the power of self-disclosure to command audience attention, and the usefulness of the story as a vehicle for both developing ideas and facilitating audience attention. When self-disclosing behavior is modeled, dramatized, and legitimized early in the semester, there is often more personal disclosure and more effect in succeeding presentations throughout the course of the semester.

I can still remember a day of “I Was At My Best Presentations” which will forever be etched upon my mind. And finally, like the day had been scripted in advance, Maria told us that she was at her best when she was able to forgive the father of her best friend. It is days like this in Communication 103 where students are reminded that nothing is more powerful that one human being speaking passionately and with conviction to another.

On the last day of presentations we vote for the three best, “I Was At My Best Presentations” and special prizes are awarded to these students. All students in the class are given a button which says “I Was At My Best In Communication 103” which they are required to wear on any days in which presentations are being given in class.

Finally, the “I Was At My Best Presentation” functions effectively as a tool for motivation. There are many metaphors for teaching (e.g., teacher as collaborator, teacher as farmer, teacher as parent, teacher as mountaineering guide). In teaching public speaking, I have moved away from the metaphor “teacher as information disseminator” and have increasingly adopted the metaphor “teacher as motivator.” At the close of these presentations, students are reminded that the times they were at their best are almost always the result of their ability to harness skills they worked hard to develop, to energize potentials they did not know they had, and that developing skill in public speaking is the result of the same type of energy and effort they have already demonstrated in different contexts. It has been my experience that this presentation helps build class cohesion, and begins to lay the foundation for students collaborating with other students in the pursuit of speaking excellence. Creating a classroom culture in which students help other students develop and enhance their skill in speaking is absolutely essential if learners are to achieve a maximum level of competence.

This next academic year marks my twentieth year in teaching, and in almost each of those years I have taught at least one course in public speaking. Without question, some of the most memorable and powerful student presentations I have heard are what I call the “I Was At My Best Presentation.”

Readings
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Introducing Gender-Biased Language: Much Ado About Something

Goal: To make students aware of the gender-bias present within our language prior to addressing the importance and impact of language within our everyday interactions.

Male generic language is language that purports to include both women and men, yet specifically refers only to men. ... Some people think it is understood that women are included in terms such as mankind and chairman. This viewpoint, however, is not supported by research on how people interpret male generic language (Wood, 1994, pp. 125-126).

I often find it difficult to address the issue of gender-bias as it exists within our language. Students, when confronted with the notion of a gender-biased language, frequently react with negativity, apathy, or total disregard. Thus, after numerous attempts to enlighten my students, I came up with a simple learning activity that allows me to introduce the gender-bias issue before addressing the crucial role that language plays.