"And the Award Goes To…"
A Positive Alternative to the Traditional Introductory Speech

Goal: The goal of this assignment is to make the first presentation in a beginning speech class a positive experience for the student. Through the use of partnered speaking and positive affirmations, this assignment is often met with much less resistance than other presentation projects.

Rationale: This assignment is particularly useful with highly anxious speakers. According to Adler and Rodman, “People often feel apprehensive about speech giving because of previous negative experiences (2000). Further, the fear of a negative appraisal is often cited as one of the main reasons for speech apprehension (Engleberg and Daly 2005). Tapping into positive esteem issues before and during the speech itself can minimize nervousness and lead to a satisfying outcome for even very anxious students.

Directions: I use the Award Speech as a first speech assignment, and only require it to be 2-3 minutes long. Students are paired up randomly and given the assignment on the second day of class, and five class periods later they are delivering it. The student handout reads as follows:

This speech will involve you introducing a classmate to the rest of the class. Here’s the scenario: Your classmate has been nominated for the University of Toledo Student of the Year Award. You are on the selection committee, and are introducing him/her as your number one choice to the rest of the committee (your classmates in the audience). After your speech the nominee would normally stand and give his or her acceptance speech, but of course no one will. Point out a few interesting things about your classmate, and mention why he/she deserves this award. The key to this speech is developing appropriate, partner-specific criteria for this award, and explaining how your nominee (your partner) meets these criteria so perfectly.

The day of the presentation, I have partners come forward and while one speaks, the other (the “nominee”) sits in a chair facing the audience. When the first speaker finishes, they switch places.

Explanation: There are several reasons why this assignment works so well. First, they get friendly with someone in class. I give them 10 to 15 minutes at the end of every class to talk and exchange data, so most dyads get to know each other pretty well by the time the speaking date rolls around. This obviously makes them feel more confident when getting up in front of the rest of the class for the speech; they know they have at least one ally in the audience. Also, going up front with a partner is easier than going up alone.

A second reason this assignment works well is because it forces students to think about their partner’s best qualities. As I explain to them in class, if their partner happens to be a 4.0 student who is also the president of student
government, good for them. BUT, an equally strong presentation could be given about a partner who has less than ideal academic or extracurricular standing, by changing the criteria for the award. Perhaps the student can argue that the award should be given to an individual who has demonstrated great school spirit, an outgoing, social personality, or does a commendable job balancing school life with family life. Any of these are perfectly acceptable, as long as the speech illustrates how the nominee fits these criteria. This notion of setting up points and then matching them is a concept that I build off of for future speeches, as they learn more complex organizational formats. Since this speech has a little more structure than traditional introductory speeches, students aren’t quite so “scattered” as they find main points and build them into a coherent pattern.

The third and perhaps the most noteworthy of all reasons why this assignment works well is because it is usually a real ego boost to all involved. Almost all of the speakers are very complimentary to their partners, and in my experience, it’s pretty reassuring to hear a few nice words said about you in front of a crowd! I have seen a noticeable decrease in anxiety with this assignment compared to other beginning speech assignments.

**Typical Results:** Although the first speech is always met with trepidation, this assignment usually ends on a high note. The entire class has learned a little more about each other, which will make future speeches easier, and everyone’s esteem was raised a notch. Some of the speeches have notes of humor, some are a little more personal, and some are serious, but all of them are interesting. Scores on this speech are usually fairly high, since the requirements are not terribly demanding, but a positive first graded performance paves the way for more confidence down the road.

**References**
