Teaching Public Speaking Principles Through Impromptu Speaking

Goal: To provide public speaking instructors and students with a method of improving the teaching of public speaking theory and principles.

As public speaking instructors, one of the most important challenges we have involves developing teaching strategies that empower students to improve performance while developing responsibility, class supportiveness, confidence, and interest. The best way we have found to do this is to use impromptu speeches to teach public speaking principles. The technique involves the following procedure.

First, the instructor divides the textbook’s chapter(s) into subtopics. For example, two typical index cards for a chapter on nonverbal aspects of public speaking would be, “Illustrate and explain why eye contact is important for an effective speech,” and “What are some of the habits of posture we most need to avoid in a good speech?” Ideally there will be sufficient subtopics for each student to speak each day the activity is used, and all chapter concepts will be covered.

Each day that theory and principles are being taught, the instructor places all the cards for that day’s concepts in a pile in the front of the classroom. The first student to speak takes the top card and speaks immediately for one to two minutes on whatever topic turns up. For example, if the chapter being covered is on using language creatively, a student might be asked to explain the uses of metaphors by giving an example of a metaphor that is vivid, memorable, and effective and explaining why it had such an effect.

The card might stipulate that the metaphor explained be one the student read or heard somewhere other than the text. For the sake of continuity, the cards should be stacked in a meaningful order. For example, all cards relating to speech introductions should be together in the pile so that impromptu discussions of introductions are covered together. We have found it best to allow students to determine the order of speaking, but have also found it important to informally encourage students to avoid repetitive patterns such as the same people waiting until the end to speak.

Discussion, clarification, and further illustration of the day’s concepts can be interjected between speakers as needed, and particularly in the instructor’s summary after all students have spoken. An evaluation step is important. Thus, the instructor should also give some feedback to the class concerning the performance aspect of the impromptu presentations. This process can be a good way to introduce students to the benefits of feedback and constructive criticism.

When we developed this method we were concerned that students would find it stressful and intimidating. This has not been the case, although impromptu speaking should probably not be required of students who experience very high levels of communication apprehension. In our classes, the following benefits have consistently resulted from using this approach.

First, student class performance has improved. Students are pushed to know reading material and develop their own examples for each concept before class. It is not unusual to see study teams forming to meet outside of class to help each other master the material. The approach fosters an attitude of respect for regular preparation for class. Second, students’ sense of responsibility as speakers and audience members has improved through their increased empowerment over the class process. The class works only if all participate, and is only as interesting as everyone makes it. Students develop a sense that they are preparing each other for public speaking rather than being prepared by one authority. Third, confidence has improved. Every theory/principle day provides an opportunity for each student to be a successful speaker and to receive praise for it. This builds confidence in themselves and their audience. Fourth, student learning has improved. Students explain principles with examples and illustrations that are meaningful to themselves and each other. They learn to apply their own experiences to the speaking process. Fifth, supportiveness has increased. Students are so familiar with being both a speaker and audience member in their particular class that they develop concern and support for each other well before their first formal speeches. A team spirit emerges. Students often build on examples given by previous speakers. They have a sense that others are listening to them, and working toward a common goal. Sixth, interest and enjoyment levels have improved. In course reviews, students regularly report how much they enjoyed the impromptu method. Speakers change rapidly and the whole class is continuously physically involved and participating. The energy level remains high; a level of anticipation and drama is maintained through the mystery of what will come up next and who will speak. Students frequently come up with humorous and creative examples to keep things light and interesting. It is far more interesting for everyone to consider an impromptu question like, “What is a statistic YOU have never forgotten, and why did it have such an impact on you?” than it is to turn the pages and trot through a list of generalized criteria that statistics must meet in an effective speech.

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