Impromptu Speaking Options

Goal: To provide options for speech teachers to use for impromptu speeches.

Teachers assign impromptu speeches based on three assumptions:

- Some important speeches cannot be prepared in advance,
- Strategies for coping with such speeches can be introduced in speech class,
- Class practice will make the students more confident when they make impromptu speeches later in life.

But what kinds of assignments are most beneficial to teach such skills?

Assignment: Fortune Cookie Speech

Students tend to be unusually apprehensive about impromptu speaking because fear of the unknown causes stage fright (what will my topic be?). I have found curiosity to be an effective antidote to stage fright.

Before class I visit a food specialty store—or a large grocery store—and buy two boxes of fortune cookies, enough for each student. The students know from the assignment sheet that the impromptus are coming, so for several days they are asking about them. I remain mysterious and evasive, a conscious ploy to heighten their curiosity. It works.

On the day of the impromptu speeches, I bring my fortune cookies in a bag, obviously “hiding” the sack under the desk lectern. I then use several visuals to give special instructions for coping with the impromptu. Finally, with a bit of drama, I reach under the desk and reveal my plan: Each student will be given a fortune cookie, the topic inside to be the one to be spoken on impromptu. They feel obliged to groan, but I sense they would not back out for anything, even if they could.

First, I give each student a fortune cookie which they cannot, of course, open until told to do so. Then I randomly select one student to start, giving that student a second cookie with the instructions, “Open this cookie now. I will give you two minutes to prepare. Then walk to the front and give your speech. On your way to the front, take your other cookie and give it to any other student.” That student, in turn, will open the cookie and have two minutes to prepare while the first student is giving her or his impromptu. The cycle then continues until each student has opened a cookie and then talked on the fortune inside.

Just one warning—as teacher, be prepared to have the last student give you her or his fortune cookie for a speech. The students love this part, seeing their teacher being put on the spot too!

Assignment Two: You Are the Message

Another rich source of impromptu topics comes from the students themselves. The first speech of the semester is biographical, students introducing each other. Although I don’t grade this speech, I do take notes. Telling the students exactly what I am doing, I jot down information from each introduction. When time for the impromptu speeches arrives, I take these notes and tailor-make a question for each student.

The questions might be as follows:

- In your introductory speech, I learned that you have four brothers and no sisters. Discuss one advantage and one disadvantage of this sibling configuration.
- In your introductory speech, I learned that you have lived in eight different states because your father was in the military.

Readings


Appreciation to Catherine Kaha.

Hazel J. Rozema, Mankato State University, MN
Give us three reasons why moving so much has been advantageous.

- In your introductory speech, I learned that you are a martial arts brown belt and also an elementary education major. Explain how these two interests will complement each other after you have finished college.

**Appraisal**

Because the students know all semester that they will be asked something about themselves, they are less apprehensive—and less curious, I might add—about the autobiographical impromptu speech than about the fortune cookie one, which I intentionally keep vague. If a teacher sees possibilities in both options, one could be used for an impromptu speech and the other could be used as a warm-up speech. Judging from the students' feedback, however, both of these options satisfy the rationale for assigning impromptu speeches in the first place. Also, both options satisfy a basic pedagogical rule for assigning impromptu speeches: By assigning one specific topic, students will be less inclined to freeze up with stage fright.

**Readings**


Wilma McClarty, Southern Adventist University, TN

**An Alternative To Demographic Audience Analysis**

**Goal:** To have students differentiate between audience analysis and stereotyping and to acquire skills for looking beyond a simplistic demographic analysis to enhance their speeches.

In public speaking class, almost everyone teaches audience analysis. In reviewing the textbooks, demographic audience analysis is prevalent. Requiring students to perform a demographic analysis of their audience and make generalizations about the audience based on those superficial characteristics, however, may be teaching students more about stereotyping than about how to meet their audience's needs.

In reviewing a majority of speech textbooks, I found that demographic audience analysis is included in almost every one. Authors give instructions about how to gather information about ethnicity, age, gender, or socioeconomic status. The majority of the authors, however, give little more information about how to use this information beyond the typical statement: “Once you know about your audience, you will know how to adapt your speech to them.” This type of analysis teaches students that we can lump all people with one characteristic together and that those people will all be the same.

I argue that such an analysis of audience characteristics is extremely superficial and may be harmful. Characteristics such as age and ethnicity do not offer the student a deeper analysis of such audience attributes as personal situation, intrinsic concerns, historical commonalities, and differences. Such surface generalities can perpetuate stereotypes and foster a disregard for subtleties.

A colleague at graduate school, Gabrielle C. King, introduced me to an alternative method of conveying the importance and intricacies of audience analysis to students in the basic public speaking course. I have adapted and used this learning activity successfully over the past five years. The exercise is designed to encourage students to consider the wide range of characteristics and attributes associated with an audience and to make some judgments regarding their message based on these considerations. This exercise can be adapted for completion outside the classroom, but the dynamics generated from using it as a classroom learning activity have proven valuable.

**Assignment**

The instructor begins by writing, in column form, three different audiences on the blackboard. For the basic public speaking course in college, the following hypothetical audiences offered a variety of considerations: first graders, a gourmet chef, and a group of college students. If the class is not composed of college students, then substitute their title for that category (i.e. business people, teachers).

The instructor asks students to design a speech for each of these audiences regarding “How to prepare breakfast.” The groups are to emphasize what is to be said and how it is to be presented. The instructor elicits responses from the students concerning what main points they would include in their messages. As the main points are volunteered, the instructor should ask why the point was included and how it was addressed. Responses usually include issues of relevancy, prior knowledge of subject, use of visuals, intelligence level, and setting. It is important for the instructor to challenge such issues as the omission of main points and rationale for the importance of some considerations.

Generally, a standard response for the first grade audience is that they should not use the stove without supervision and that visual aids are useful. For the college students, the students respond that a main point should be how to prepare inexpensive items. They justify this point by stating that most college students...