Students interact with their authors regarding various choices made during the research process. The number of interactions each student has varies. I expect students to contact their author a minimum of five times throughout the term. The ease of e-mail contact makes it possible for students to print out their messages and the responses to the questions asked about the research process. The printout of questions and answers also provides a mechanism to help grade the assignment. The instructor can identify that the students engaged in the interactions and can see what kinds of initial and follow-up questions the students asked. In the initial trials of this exercise I graded the assignment on a pass/fail basis, but it certainly could be a traditionally graded assignment as well.

The interactions typically correspond to the classroom lectures and discussion about the research process. So at the time when the class is discussing how to pick a topic, the students ask the author how she or he came to research that topic. If the class is discussing building an argument in a literature review which leads to a hypothesis, the students might ask about the reasoning of his or her support from previous research. When the class is discussing making choices about which methodology to choose, the students could ask about those choices for that particular research project. Or, for example, when the class is discussing how to choose which subjects to interview or survey, the students ask the author what decisions she or he made about subject selection and also ask for a copy of the actual questionnaire that most likely was not included in the manuscript or article. This can lead to dialogue about the questions asked on the survey instrument. These questions asked throughout the term allow the students to apply the lecture and discussion material to a completed research paper, and thus to see how the theory and choices guide the process for any given research project.

**Follow-up to Students**

The follow-up for this particular assignment comes throughout the term. As the lectures address different issues in the research process, students are reminded to "ask the author" and contribute to class discussions with specific examples that they have gathered as a result of the interactions. The assumption is that if the students read their manuscripts or articles, and have questions that relate to the specific part of the research process being discussed in the textbook and during class environment, they can "ask the author." So not only are the students reading a complete research article, they are understanding it and the research process better as a result of their conversations with the author. Additionally, they selected an article of interest to them and not because that was the article chosen for illustration in the textbook or by their instructor.

**Analysis**

When I assign this activity I talk about respect for the author’s ideas and time. I make sure the students know they are to introduce themselves as students enrolled in a communication research course and explain the purpose of their request and the reason for picking the author’s article. I also tell them to include my name, e-mail address and office phone number should the authors have any questions about the activity. An instructor can send an advance letter to the authors if necessary. I make sure the students give the contacted authors a chance to refuse to participate if their schedules do not permit involvement. I make sure students have picked more than one article or manuscript in case one of their choices does not work out.

Several adaptations to this assignment can be made to fit the needs of individual instructors and courses. As mentioned earlier, you could also use this assignment for courses other than research methods courses. In this case the learning would be more specifically tailored to the topic and information covered in the article rather than the process used to conduct the research. If used in a research methods course, one adaptation would be to pick one article. Every student would have a copy of the article. The class as a whole would generate questions to ask the author. One student could be assigned to actually initiate the contact and ask the questions (or the instructor could do it) and then copies of the interactions could be processed by the whole class. In this adaptation, a variation could be that the students generate questions, come up with what they think are the answers and compare their answers with the author’s.

I have found this assignment to be a useful way of integrating knowledge about the research process with the application of that knowledge. Achieving this integration prior to the students attempting to conduct their own research makes for better final projects in the communication research course.

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**Practicing Impromptu Speeches**

**Goal:** To help students identify components of impromptu speaking and offer them opportunities to practice those elements.

I find that impromptu speeches are often weak because they suffer from incomplete development. This exercise helps students understand what is required in an impromptu speech and to quickly organize and deliver an effective impromptu speech.

At the end of my lecture on impromptu speaking, the elements of the impromptu speech are written on the board (i.e., introductions, transitions, conclusions, organization, and development variety). At this point, I ask for a volunteer to try...
delivering an impromptu speech. I give the volunteer a question out of the Book of Questions and read it to the class. The Book of Questions is filled with 200 unrelated questions designed to stimulate conversation and explore a person’s values, beliefs, and attitudes. Both direct questions, such as: “How close and warm is your family?” and hypothetical questions, such as: “If you were at a friend’s house for Thanksgiving dinner and you found a dead cockroach in your salad, what would you do?”

After a couple of minutes of preparation time we begin. By allowing two to three minutes, the student has time to confront any nervousness and begin to think about how to respond to the question. I ask the question again and the volunteer begins the impromptu speech. As the student volunteer proceeds through the speech, I stand at the board and put stars beside the components in the impromptu speech when the student incorporates that item into the speech. I put a star by the introduction once it is complete and then if the volunteer has an analogy, I put a star by analogy and so on. I do not tell the students that I am going to do this for two reasons: first, they enjoy figuring it out and second, to avoid making the volunteer more nervous than necessary. In this way, the class learns to identify the elements of an impromptu speech in a fun, non-graded exercise.

Once the practice speech is complete we discuss the presentation. Sometimes I begin by asking the class what the main point or points were. Once these are discussed, I follow with a question about how these points were developed. Sometimes, I ask what the introduction set us up to hear and what we actually heard. The class talks about the parts of the speech that worked and parts that could have been better. The same student is then asked to re-do the impromptu speech with the added improvements. McKeachie (1994) noted, “Practice works if learners see the results of their practice and gain information from the results about what to do” (p. 282).

After the speech has been discussed and delivered a second time, I ask for another volunteer to do an impromptu speech. A question is selected and preparation time is given. However, this time instead of marking the elements of the impromptu speech on the board myself, I appoint a student to identify the speech elements on the board. After the speech, the discussion of strengths and weaknesses is led by the student at the board who identifies the elements included in the speech and cites examples to support the analysis. The audience must pay close attention to the discussion because they may be called upon to agree or disagree with the classmate’s assessment. We continue this exercise until the end of class.

Appraisal

During this exercise, students are challenged to think critically about the elements of a speech and how they work together in impromptu speeches. The students are working on the speeches to make them better and identifying the elements of the speech which seems to help them understand how of impromptu speaking. There is a noticeable difference in the quality of the impromptu speaking in my classes after I implemented this exercise.

References


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Dialoguing the Gender Movements

Goal: To allow students to demonstrate, communicate, and understand women’s and men’s movements throughout history. This assignment can be used for interpersonal, family or gender communication courses.

Students sometimes have difficulty or perhaps lack the interest in, understanding the men’s and women’s movements and how these movements impact our behaviors with others. Individuals’ belief systems guide their communication patterns. As Wood (1997) indicated, studying communication and gender will (1) enhance appreciation of how values and habits influence views of gender, (2) enhance effectiveness as a communicator by appreciating diverse communication styles through learning and listening to others, and (3) expanding choices of language in our global society in order to learn about alternative ways to communicate with others. Identifying with a particular movement can be quite helpful for students to realize how and why they interact with others, as well as understand how others perceive them through their communicative choices about feminism and masculinity.

As a pedagogical tool, this assignment involves experiential learning and active participation of course material, encourages students to critically think about and present material to an audience, and allows students to understand communication differences of how individuals behave in relation to the movement to which they identify.

Assignment

Part I. First a brief lecture on the importance of gender movements (10-15 minutes) should be provided for the students. This involves presenting a time-line with dates and titles for each movement (though contemporary ones are taking place simultaneously), and a rationale of why it’s important to understand how movements impact the way individuals communicate. Be careful not to provide too much information at the beginning since the goal is for students to interpret each movement in his or her own words. Movements can be found in the texts of Bate and Bowker (1997) and Wood (1997). After a brief introduction, ask students to write down the movement which they think they most closely follow and why. Students will take a few