Speech Assignments—Impromptu Speeches

Using Quotations As Impromptu Speech Topics

Goal: To provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate both their knowledge of course concepts and their impromptu speaking skills.

"How can I speak about a topic that I don’t know anything about?" is a frequent complaint of students in my basic public speaking class. While I usually rebuff their criticisms with a cajoling, "Of course, you do. Just think about it" or a sarcastic, "Where have you been for the last 20 years," part of me (as a past student and now as a teacher who has listened to a few years of impromptu speaking based on the pick-a-topic-out-of-the-hat approach) feels that their comments have validity. I incorporate impromptu speaking into the class because it forces students to think on their feet. Unfortunately, some students do not have a broad base of knowledge on current issues. Consequently, many of their impromptu speeches are ineffective because they are laden with generalities and repetition, rather than supported with concrete details, examples, and so on. In other words, while speeches have structure, they have little substance.

With knowledge comes substance, so I designed an impromptu speech that capitalizes on something that I know students have knowledge of—their public speaking course. From various chapter headings of assorted communication texts and from reference books such as Familiar Quotations, I collected 40 or so quotations on public speaking or communication-related topics. These quotations vary from the comical, "Reading a speech is like kissing through a veil," to the more serious "Speak that I may see you" (Socrates).

To make the quotations easy to read, I type them, all capital letters and double-spaced, on 5" x 8" index cards. Students draw 2 cards out of "a hat" and then select one to develop into a 2-3 minute impromptu speech. To prepare students for their speech, I suggest that they do the following:

1. Determine what studied concept or point is expressed by the quotation. For example, "Reading a speech is like kissing through a veil" relates to delivery.
2. Decide where to place the quotation. That is, would it be more effective in the introduction or in the conclusion?
3. Concentrate on supporting their interpretation by drawing on information gained from lectures, discussions, readings, and from listening to past speeches.

I am pleased by the quality of the speeches given. When polled for their reactions, most students felt confident with their own presentations and impressed with what they heard. While this speech may be given at almost any time during the semester, it is especially useful at the end—for impromptu presentations given during the last class serve a dual purpose: I gather how much students have absorbed and the speeches serve as a course summary, leaving me to provide only a final commentary.

Kathleen Beauchene

The "Just a Minute" Impromptu Exercise

Goal: To increase the ability of public speaking students to use language effectively.

The British conduct civilized quiz shows, with an emphasis more on wit and cleverness than one finds on "Wheel of Fortune." A year ago I was listening to such a show, "Just a Minute," on the World Service of the BBC and I adopted the idea for use as an impromptu exercise in public speaking. Students like it (one student even reported playing it with her family on a long car trip), but even better, speaking improves as a result of playing it.

The rules are straightforward. Four contestants are in turn given a common word to speak on for 60 seconds (i.e., donut, piano, elephant). However, the speaker can be challenged for one of three reasons by the three other contestants:

1. Hesitation, including nonfluencies
2. Deviation from the topic or from the rules of grammar
3. Repetition of words unnecessarily. (This is the hardest rule. The topic can be repeated, as can pronouns, articles and prepositions, and perhaps the verb "to be." But nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs may not be repeated.)

When a contestant thinks the speaker has violated a rule, he or she yells out a challenge, which is adjudicated by the instructor. A successful challenger receives one point and the opportunity to continue speaking for whatever is left of the original minute. A player who makes a successful challenge at the 55 second point has five seconds left to continue on the topic (a stopwatch is needed). A speaker who is incorrectly challenged receives a point and may continue speaking.

The person who is speaking at the conclusion of the minute receives a point. In the rare case that a person speaks the full minute without being challenged, he or she receives two points. With advanced students, ad-
speech to adults on the topic of distributing condoms in schools and focus on eye contact while delivering the speech. These are not your typical public speaking situations, but as I tell my students, when you least expect it, expect it. This lesson is challenging but structured so that all students can be successful.

The beauty of this lesson lies in students perceiving it as more of a game than a challenging assignment. Whenever I introduce the assignment, the kids assume an attitude of mild amusement; they think the teacher has finally lost it. I, however, also get to assume an attitude of amusement. I know that what my students are doing is academically challenging.

Not bad for a game.

John R. Holt

Using Oral Self-Evaluations to Assess and Improve Public Speaking Skills

Goal: To provide students with the opportunity to orally self-evaluate and improve public speaking confidence.

One challenge for basic public speaking course students is incorporating, while presenting speeches, the suggestions for improvement provided by instructors on written speech critique sheets. After years of translating these suggestions orally, we created an activity that helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses, thus improving speaking performance. Students positively refer to this oral self-evaluation activity as the "confession session."

This activity is assigned prior to the students' final speeches. Because they have presented several speeches by this point in the course, students are used to communicating with their classmates and instructor and are comfortable sharing their oral self-evaluations with an audience.

They are not graded on this assignment.

We describe the self-evaluation process during one class session and schedule one or two classes for the presentations. Students are asked to review public speaking concepts and ask questions if a concept or concepts are unclear. They are also asked to study a clean copy of the speech critique form used in the class and consider how these concepts, used together, insure that effective public speaking occurs. They are then requested to reflect upon the comments provided on each of the graded critique forms that have been returned to them following speeches they have presented throughout the term, looking for patterns concerning personal strengths and weaknesses as a public speaker. We ask that they list those strengths and weaknesses, concentrating on how well they achieve general and specific speech purposes, analyze and adapt to the audience, organize material, use supporting material, and deliver ideas to the audience. The product of this self-analysis is a two to three minute speech that describes both strengths and weaknesses, including reasons why the student believes he or she is successful with certain aspects of public speaking, where and why he or she experiences weaknesses, and how weak areas might be improved.

We have been amazed at students' candor in describing poor performance in certain areas (e.g., lack of preparation, laziness, personal biases, and so forth) as well as their accuracy in acknowledging and describing personal strengths. Their suggestions for self-improvement and their comments concerning how to improve course instruction have also been insightful. Following this activity, students tend to present exceptionally well-organized and delivered final speeches which seem to incorporate insights gained from the self-evaluation process.

The instructor's purpose in teaching basic public speaking involves not only insuring that students understand basic course concepts but also assuring that they can demonstrate their knowledge when presenting ideas to an audience. This activity, in our view, evaluates whether or not the transfer of learning from cognitive to performance levels has occurred and aids us in improving our teaching strategies in the course.

Mary Mino, Marilyn N. Butler

Life's Lessons

Goal: To allow students to practice informational speaking skills, particularly by creating understanding and building relevance.

This activity uses R. M. Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet (1934). This small book comprises a collection of Rilke's correspondence to F. Kappus, a budding young poet. Through a series of letters written between 1902-1908, Rilke mentors this youth by attempting to answer many of life's questions. Rilke's advice addresses issues I have found particularly relevant to college-age students (i.e., pursuing dreams and vocations; believing in oneself; dealing with loneliness, intimacy and relationships; delaying gratification; living with unanswered questions). Teachers unable to find the collection can accomplish similar objectives with a current book that deals with life issues.

At the beginning of the semester, I assign one of the ten letters along with a presentation day to each student. I also provide a handout that offers some guidelines and suggestions about how they might approach the learning activity. Haynes' (1985) article "O-I-C: An Orality-Based Procedure for Teaching Interactive Communication in the Basic Course" is an effective pedagogical resource for framing this particular learning activity. The student is then responsible for teaching the class the "life lesson" that Rilke describes in letters to Kappus. Some of my recommended guidelines follow:

Instructions to Students

1. Orient yourself to the letter.
   • What is the message?
   • What advice is Rilke trying to convey to Kappus?
   • How does Rilke reach Kappus?