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Tammy Swenson-Lepper

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‘Community’ As a Guiding Theme for the Public Speaking Course

Tammy Swenson-Lepper

Course: Public Speaking

Objectives: To meet course objectives related to informative, persuasive, and group presentations. To introduce students to aspects of communities, including university, city, regional, and/or vocational communities, through the informative speech assignment. To introduce students to controversial issues from one of their communities through the persuasive speech assignment. To provide students with the opportunity to learn about and serve the local community, while gaining meaningful group experiences through the group presentation assignment. To provide students with opportunities to learn research skills.

Rationale

First-year students at many universities find themselves in new communities, with little understanding of how their new university, city, academic, or career communities function. Developing a student’s sense of community can have long-term benefits. As Tinto (n.d., pp. 9–10) points out, “Membership in the community of the classroom provides important linkages to membership in communities external to the classroom. For new students in particular, engagement in the community of the classroom becomes a gateway for subsequent involvement in the academic and social communities of the college generally.” Using the theme of “Community” in the basic public speaking course provides students with opportunities to directly explore many communities in their informative, persuasive, and group presentations. While there are other graded assignments and activities that provide students with opportunities to improve their public speaking skills and to learn about community, the three major speaking assignments, which make up more than 50% of the student’s grade, are the most relevant to the theme.

The three assignments are an individual informative presentation, an individual persuasive presentation, and a group presentation. The work students do to complete...
these assignments is similar to that which Laird, Chen, and Kuh (2008) note is likely to contribute to student retention, persistence in college, and graduation rates because they help the students focus on career goals and allow the students to form social networks. A 2008 ACT (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004) policy report examined the literature on student retention and found that social involvement, social support, and academic goals were related to college retention. Because the individual informative and persuasive assignments allow students to explore careers or their community, the speaking assignments are designed to play a role in helping students become socially involved, perceive social support, and refine their academic goals. The group presentation and the group work preceding it allow students to form a social support network, work closely with a faculty member and community members, and become connected to peers, the community, and the university.

These assignments are designed to promote involvement in the classroom and the community and to make learning relevant (Kiesa et al., 2007). As Tinto (2002), a noted expert on student retention, points out, “Involvement matters, especially during the first year of college when student membership in the communities of the campus is so tenuous” (p. 3). He also notes that “the more students find value in their learning, the more they see it connected to their own interests, the [more] likely they will become involved in learning and in turn learn more and persist more frequently” (p. 4).

Course Overview

In addition to the assignments discussed in this paper, the course also includes daily reading quizzes, two exams, a library research assignment, and impromptu speeches. These foundation assignments make up slightly less than half of the points for the course, but provide students with the opportunity to learn information about public speaking and practice presentation skills.

The three major speaking assignments include the same general parts: for all three assignments, the group or individual turns in an outline prior to the presentation and receives feedback on the outline at least one week in advance of the presentation, the individual or group delivers the presentation, and, for individual assignments, the person watches a video of the presentation and writes a self-critique of his or her presentation based on the grading criteria for the assignment.

During the first week of the course, the class spends time discussing what it means to be part of a community. Discussion questions include: What is a community? What does it mean to be a member of a community? How can we make our communities better? How does public speaking relate to being a member of a community? Because first-year students at my university tend to be reticent about discussion, especially early in the semester, the students answer these questions in a one-minute paper format and then we have a class discussion. Defining community as a class sets the stage for the semester.
Major Speaking Assignment One: Informative Presentation

This assignment makes up approximately 17% of the overall grade, including a preparation outline, the presentation, and a self-critique paper.\(^1\)

**Description of Activity**

In the informative presentation, students research a specific aspect of the university, city, or region, OR they research a career community that they might wish to join after graduation. First-year, traditional-age students are the primary audience for the public speaking course, so they often have little knowledge about the new university community to which they have moved. They also may have few ideas about the type of vocational community to which they might wish to belong. The first option, looking at an aspect of the local community, provides students with an opportunity to connect with the community, which has been shown to increase persistence in college (Tinto, 2002). Since students with career goals tend to persist in college (Hull-Blanks et al., 2005), the second option for this assignment provides students with an opportunity to evaluate a vocational community and decide if it is one they might wish to join.

For this assignment, a student might do research and present information on a club or major on campus, a local landmark, or a specific career, such as pediatric nursing. These presentations serve to provide information to the class about topics that they are likely to know little about, but which also provide them with more knowledge of topics that are of interest to them: their new home and possible careers. The two assignment options differ only in that, for the career option, the students must interview someone who currently works in the job they are researching. They must integrate the interview into their presentation as one of their sources. Based on these requirements, students prepare a six- to eight-minute presentation.

To prepare for this presentation, we spend a day in class generating topic ideas related to the two general topic areas for this speech: the local community and specific careers. The students also receive a list of topics that other students have done during previous semesters. No topic can be claimed by more than one student, so that the class learns about a wide variety of careers and many aspects of the community. Because the students are required to cite six sources in their presentations, we spend a class period looking at the resources available in the library and in the community (e.g., local newspaper database, historical society information, and public library) for their topic. Students also have the opportunity to use the Bureau of Labor Statistics website to find out information about careers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010–2011). Students complete a library assignment that provides hands-on experience with the library and local resources.

**Instructor Preparation**

For this assignment, the instructor may wish to work with resource people on campus to ensure that students are able to find relevant information. For the presentation
focused on the community, the instructor may wish to contact the library to ensure that local resources, such as databases with historical information, are readily available. For the career-based presentation, instructors may wish to contact the Career Services office on campus to help students locate resources about their career interests.

**Major Speaking Assignment Two: Persuasive Presentation**

This assignment makes up approximately 22% of the overall grade, including a preparation outline, the presentation, and a self-critique paper.

**Description of Activity**

In the persuasive presentation, students persuade their audience about a persuasive topic that is important to a community to which they belong. For instance, they may focus their persuasive speech on a topic that is relevant on campus, such as parking plans, or a topic that is of local importance, like a school referendum. In our state, college students can register to vote at the polls, so their votes may make a difference on election night. By focusing the persuasive speech on a topic that is relevant to their community, students find it easier to form arguments and create a well-thought-out rationale. Instead of giving a presentation about a generic persuasive topic, this assignment focuses on making the topic relevant to each student’s interests. As Tinto (2002, p. 4) notes, “relevant learning is a condition for student learning and retention.”

Students are required to use appropriate forms of support, use high quality, recent sources, and avoid topics that are primarily informative. Students can target their speeches in one of four ways: they can persuade their audience to (1) volunteer for a group they believe is important, (2) take action to solve a local problem, (3) become members of a particular group, or (4) protest a particular organization based on a decision it has made. Based on these requirements, students research and present an eight- to 10-minute persuasive speech.

**Instructor Preparation**

For the second option for this assignment (taking action to solve a local problem), the instructor should track the op-ed section of local and campus newspapers. Knowing which issues are currently significant in the community will make it easier to help students focus on a local issue, if the student has not already chosen to support or protest another organization (options 1, 3, and 4). Instructors may wish to spend some time during a class session where students brainstorm topic ideas and get feedback from classmates about their topics.

**Major Speaking Assignment Three: Group Presentation**

This assignment makes up approximately 14% of the overall grade, including a preparation outline and the presentation.
Description of Activity

As part of the university’s general education requirements, students must complete a group presentation in the public speaking course. In this version of the course, students work on a service-learning project in the community. They complete their work together and then create a presentation that expands on the information they gained through their service. For instance, if students have worked in an elementary school’s learning garden, they would research learning gardens and their value for school children. In their presentations, they also reflect on what the experience taught them about their community and themselves. Research has shown that service-learning assignments such as this can play a role in retention, improve academic outcomes, and create a closer connection to faculty members (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

The requirements for this project and presentation are discussed in class and provided on an assignment sheet. Typically, I present some service opportunities in class, but it is the group’s responsibility to find a project that is meaningful to the group and that meets the criteria that the group (1) work with a local community group, (2) perform six to eight hours of service each, and (3) collaborate extensively within the group in order to complete the service project. The project should be something that students could not do individually.

Groups may choose to do either an informative or persuasive presentation (18–20 minutes) on their topics; regardless of the type of speech they choose to do, each person in the group is required to briefly reflect on the service experience. In their reflections, they may discuss what they found most surprising, what they learned about the community that they hadn’t known before, what the experience meant to them personally, any skills they might have gained from the experience, or other relevant information. The group has to determine how to avoid redundancy in their reflections and meet all of the other requirements for evidence and support for either an informative or a persuasive presentation. To help avoid the problem of social loafing, students complete peer evaluations of each group member. The peer evaluations have a direct impact on each individual’s grade.

Instructor Preparation

The group presentation assignment requires the most advance preparation on the part of the instructor, which is why it is the last one of the semester. Because this assignment is targeted at traditional-age, first-year students, it is unlikely that they will have many contacts in the community that provide them easy access to a site where they can work on a group project. If the campus has a volunteer coordinator or service learning office, instructors may wish to contact them for help putting together a list of possible projects. Instructors also may wish to use their personal contacts in the community in order to set up sites where groups can work. In general, a class with 25 students has four to five groups in it, making it necessary to find only a few sites. When I was a newcomer to my community, I found that the best partners with whom
students could work on group projects were local Parent Teacher Associations in need of help with events, food shelves, food drives, and on-campus projects, like student-led “Relay for Life” events. If students do not wish to work with any of the partner groups with whom I have relationships, they are allowed to seek out other options as long as they get instructor approval before making a commitment to work on a particular project or event.

Appraisal of Activities

Teaching public speaking with “community” as a unifying theme takes significantly more thought and preparation than using a more typical format where students are allowed a freer range of topics. To do this theme well, instructors need to work with students early in the semester to define community and to refer back to that definition even when the current topic is technical, like outlining.

Each assignment needs to be tailored for the instructor’s specific college or university environment. In some contexts, it may be challenging for students to connect with professionals in their field. On other campuses, it may be difficult to connect student groups with sites where they can have a meaningful service-learning experience. Even with the challenges of teaching public speaking this way, it is rewarding to see students, many of whom are in late adolescence, make adult connections to career, campus, or community. Sometimes, after researching a career for the informative presentation, they decide a particular career is not for them, or they decide that they want to get involved in particular activities. Either way, they are actively reflecting on their own goals and how they want to interact with their communities.

Because of the number of new assignments laid out in this essay, I recommend that instructors adopt them gradually, starting with the informative presentation assignment. A gradual process allows instructors to evaluate and modify the assignments for their environments.

Ideally, instructors would be able to track the retention of students who take a public speaking course with “community” as a theme and compare retention and persistence rates with students who take a public speaking class with more traditional assignments. While that data exists on my campus, existing policies do not allow retention data to be compared between instructors, even if the data from other instructors is aggregated.

Students benefit by becoming engaged in relevant and meaningful work (Tinto, 2002) that connects them to many communities. The presentations are more meaningful to the audience because the topics are about the local area, groups or organizations they may wish to join, or topics that might affect them personally. Additionally, because the assignments are narrowly defined, they also deter plagiarism. Students are unlikely to find speeches online or from other sources about, for instance, landmarks in the community. Since students who choose the
‘career’ community option must interview someone in the profession, they begin to establish connections to people in a career network.

Conclusion

This approach to the public speaking course provides a meaningful connection between all speaking assignments, reduces the likelihood of plagiarism, and provides students with opportunities to explore a variety of communities. One of the biggest benefits for me as an instructor has been the local and career information I have learned from listening to my students. My students often feel the same way. For instance, they and their residence hall friends may plan an event based on what they learned in class from a peer’s speech about the local community. Others have continued relationships with group members developed during their group projects. Finally, since my university has a number of first-generation college students (12–30%, depending on how it is reported), this format for the course has allowed me to have greater interaction with my students and help them find connections on campus and in the local community, both of which have been shown to increase retention, persistence, and graduation rates among first-generation students (Eyler et al., 2001; McKay & Estrella, 2008).

Note

[1] Detailed assignments and grading rubrics are available from the author.

References and Suggested Readings


