

Digital discourses: Implementing technology within the public speaking classroom

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Framework

In this semester-long project, students will be able to utilize various digital tools to meet four outcomes within the Public Speaking classroom. First, we are focused on the student's ability to demonstrate critical consumption of media technologies. Second, students should use these technologies to narrate and curate current events. Third, technology should not hinder collaboration; rather we are seeking to utilize technology to encourage collaborative efforts that may have been impossible prior to the implementation of the technology. Finally, we place an emphasis on the student's investment in digital citizenship.

For this project we place an emphasis on the notion of participatory culture, where individuals are part of a larger sustained cultural project that creates and facilitates (rather than just observes) the cultural production of information. In the classroom, our emphasis on participatory culture is manifested in our use of technology in relation to public speaking. We insist that students critically engage their own experiences and reaction to others experiences both creatively and digitally. Prior to our emphasis on technology, we felt that the public speaking classroom existed in a vacuum, where the ideas expressed barely heard by other students and were rarely engaged in relation to the outside world. Considering our location in the southeastern United States and over an hour from a large metropolitan city, we turned to technology in order for students to engage on a larger, more participatory scale. Finally, this project also de-emphasizes the traditional public speaking ethos of Truth. Rather, we encourage students to work together to push the boundaries of thinking about topics and ideas, relying on their own experiences as meaning-making.

Making It Work

This project was developed through our faculty development institute's technology initiative. We were asked to redesign general education courses with a technology-intensive focus. In redesigning the public speaking course, we incorporated tools students already used as well as new tools to reinvent the traditional three speech model of public speaking. We asked students to do a digital story, podcasting, and blogging, in addition to a traditional persuasive speech. Leaving the traditional speech within the curriculum was a purposeful choice, one made to allow students to compare different communicative experiences and still get a "traditional" public speaking experience. To ease collaboration and communication across the course projects, some

students used Twitter outside of class to ask questions of the instructor and other students; this was not mandatory and not all students participated.

Phase 1. A digital story replaced the traditional introductory speech assignment. Leopold's (2010) assignment on media stories for persuasion was adapted to fit the needs of an introductory assignment. Using Microsoft PhotoStory and/or iMovie students were asked to design a digital story that would introduce themselves to the class. I placed particular emphasis on not merely hearing about the photographs, but encouraged students to reflexively engage the photos in order to make a coherent narrative. Further, this project emphasized audience analysis, asking students what narrative they wished to share with their classmates.

We had a one 75 minute class period workshop with PhotoStory where students learned the basic functions – how to add photographs, arrange them, and add music/voiceover. Homework included completing additional tutorials on the program. We then had a question and answer day the following week to deal with issues regarding both the assignment and the software. From that point, I worked with students on an as-needed basis on the project. Most students requested additional help with editing, including adding effects, to the recording.

After creating a two to three minute digital story, we had a presentation day where students introduced their digital story and then played it for the class. In creating the story the students were required to consider their audience's needs as well as prior knowledge. They had to consider the effects of the visual (their photos) and audio (music/voice) choices in crafting a message. Students were evaluated on content (45%), including clear narrative, the significance of the narratives and the photos used and delivery (45%). Effective use of PhotoStory/iMovie software, as determined by their visual/audio product, was 10% of the assignment grade.

Phase 2. Most semesters I ask students to critique an outside presentation. In the public speaking classroom, this allows students to apply the knowledge they have learned to produce their own speeches to other, perhaps more experienced, orators in the public eye. In election semesters, I instead ask students to write a critique of one of the debates. To enhance the students' critical consumption of media through their own political discourse, I also created a course blog. I divided the class into two groups. I asked one group to blog the second debate and the second group to blog the third debate. The goal was to get the students to apply course concepts, but with the awareness of a public audience and political discourse. The difference between the blog and traditional assignment is its public nature. Students were required to respond to statements publicly, support their answer to a group, and be aware of the effect their message had on the larger conversation.

I asked the group that was not blogging for a given debate to read and respond to the posts of the bloggers. Questions I posed to the students for the blog included:

- Who is the audience for this debate?
- Did one candidate “win” the debate? Who? Why do you think so?
- What was the most effective message you heard in the debate?
- What did the nonverbal communication of each candidate convey?
- Was your opinion on any of the issues changed through the debate?

Students' posts focused on argument, delivery, nonverbal communication, and debate content. The responses to the posts asked questions (about communication styles/preferences as well as politics) and provided counter-narratives to the original post. Some posts ended up being very lively with over half the class adding into the discussion. This assignment carried over into class (and pre-class) discussions about what candidates could do to be more appealing to likely voters.

While an in-class discussion alone would have helped achieve our goal of dialogic engagement, the blogging component adding another layer of meaning. In our experience, the students who were more reticent to engage the in-class conversation were vocal in the blog posts. This allowed for a more substantive discussion both in-person and face-to-face.

Phase 3. Podcasting replaced the informative speech in order to offer students a chance to “play” with a different type of technology and further explore ways to communicate an informative message. Students created a 4- minute informative podcast on an issue or topic of interest to them. This was a research-based assignment so they were required to use a minimum of five sources for the presentation. After introducing the assignment, I introduced Audacity and showed them a tutorial, which included the basic functions. Their homework was to download Audacity, record one minute of audio, and edit that audio in some way. I also asked them to watch/listen to at least two additional tutorials. From that point, we worked individually and in groups on the podcasts. We had one individual work day where students brought in their laptops and we listened to works in progress and dealt with issues on a case-by-case basis. Students problem-solved together and taught one another about the different editing tools they had learned.

The podcasts were particularly helpful because students saw podcasting as useful to many courses they would take and mentioned how useful they would be in their future careers. Students were evaluated on a revised informative speaking rubric. I tried to keep much of the grading criteria the same as an informative speech, as our goal is to incorporate technology while still maintaining the course objectives. In addition to using the podcasting software effectively for 10% of the grade (though recording, using at least two editing tools, and finalizing the podcast), students were graded on a clear argument, appropriate use of sources, delivery and outline.

Future Implications

The greatest challenge was overcoming students perceived difficulties learning new technology. For example, they were concerned that because they had never done podcasting that they could not do podcasting. As the semester progressed, and they learned each skill set, their confidence grew. In some cases they saw ready-made applications for the tools (i.e. podcasting) and in other cases (blogging) we had to discuss ways it could be applied in their work. Students were decidedly more enthusiastic and driven after we discussed, and they saw, the practical application of all of the tools and the relationship to public speaking.

The beginning of the semester was the most challenging; not all the students had bought in to the process and I had some technology difficulties in class that slowed the buy-in. While additional practice and preparation are always helpful, I found acknowledging that moments of difficulty are to be expected was useful. It should be noted that students didn’t self-select into this section and so were expecting a traditional public speaking experience. In the future, our university is looking to correct this by marking specific course sections as “technology intensive.”

Appendix

Appendix 1. Suggested Readings.

Lind, S.J. (2011). Teaching digital oratory: Public speaking 2.0. *Communication Teacher*, 26(3), 163-169.

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