

Presentation: Begin With the Student

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Introduction to student presentations

Essential to the success of all students is their ability to make effective presentations.

“Life is a journey, not a destination”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

This simple statement carries a great deal of weight. Americans spend a significant portion of their early lives in educational institutions. There, we hope, learning is also about the journey and the process rather than just the outcome or end result. A large portion of our life and our success rests upon the ability to effectively communicate in both written and oral forms. Though we have all been asked to make many oral presentations, many of us have only been shown tools, given tips, and told to use the trial and error method to get better. If this skill is so vital to our success, why do so few of us learn the effective practices and key skills to do it well? Learning is most effective when students begin in their everyday

lives, feel comfortable, and see paths forward. Students need to start with simple examples and exercises that offer supported experiences to make their own effort easier and the outcomes more effective at attaining goals.

View of educators

For many educators, assigning an oral report means forcing students to present by standing in front of a class and talk with visual aids (or hide behind them). On the other hand, when assigned and assessing oral presentations, many educators do not provide clear guidance for what will be assessed on the rubric and serve as poor examples for the students to use as models. Little support is provided to students related to the planning and delivery of oral presentations. Many reports that in higher grades, teachers expect that the student has been taught or should know already how to make effective presentations. On the other hand, many students only know the fear of presenting in public and have only bad experiences to draw upon. To me, this vital part of our student academic and vocational career should receive more attention and support at all stages of their education.

Learning theories

There are many theories of teaching and philosophies of education. They are too diverse and numerous to review here. At the heart of these, exists debates about control, outcomes, freedom, and focus, which have raged throughout American history. To learn more about this, consult Herbert Kliebard's book *The Struggle for the American Curriculum*.

These are but a few of the core questions that fuel this debate:

- Should we specify the final state and objectives we seek using rewards triggers to attain these ends?
- How can we support student progress and development by engaging them with their peers and their facilitators to negotiate understanding?
- What intellectual and social challenges should be presented as students work to gain capacity and mastery of work?

I do not seek to answer any or engage in the debate because every view may work for some set of students in some situations. The question should not be who is right or what question is the most important to ask. Instead, we need to identify the tools that help the students learn for themselves and be successful in facing and overcoming the challenges in their own lives as they build capacity over time.

What the student needs

Every individual is different and will face unique situations. To that end, the student should then be given a basic sense of a process for approaching and understanding the challenges faced. Then most importantly, each will need to have the capacity to deal with the issues that arise as they work to meet the challenge and succeed, whether the metric of success is set by themselves, others, or the situation itself. With this understanding of my charge, I put forth the idea that teaching about presenting needs to go beyond tutoring, following models, rewarding certain behaviors, or in short, identifying what will work for one student in one class, for one circumstance. What the student deserves is the support that provides insight into the process or oral presentations coupled with support to find ways to improve what they do.

Start with what the presenter perspective

I began trying to teach oral presentations with a survey of current best practices. Then I made many attempts to present a descriptive system and scaffolding experiences for students to move them to where I wanted them to go. Each revision had me moving to larger clusters of criteria and more general lessons all closer to where the student lived each day. Instead of starting with the idea of making a presentation, I began with them introducing themselves as they would and then asked reflective questions about message and medium and other basics of communication. Through reflection and application of simple small steps, we moved together from common communication to more formal oral presentations. The more I provided the structure for them to think about what they were doing daily and provide a common language for them to discuss their issues, the more students found ways forward for their own speaking. Rather than focus on narrow specific elements of arbitrary improvement, large categories supported with video recording for self-reflection allowed students to see what they felt needed work. This also allowed them to share with classmates for feedback and finally for me to give specific feedback and support.

Oversimplification

I am of course oversimplifying this topic, there is so much variation in circumstance, and individual, that only a general approach works at this general level. This serves as my point. If we begin early and provide a common set of tools and metrics that are agreed upon, the work of fine detail and refinement can be handled as the vast majority of people already know how to do the basics.

“At one point, claiming that all Americans should learn to read would have seemed like an impossibility. Now it represents the norm and is expected of all students”

James Lipuma, 2010.

Why should the basic ability to share one's ideas effectively with an oral presentation be any different?

Conclusion

Much more exist to enable students to make an effective presentation than what is mentioned here. However, the basic assertion that everyone should be able to convey their ideas and understand the basic tools for communicating remains the same, especially for student presentations. In the series of articles that follow I will present my ideas and the scaffolding that relates to the work. I am continually testing this to refine and improve things. I do not say that there are not great speakers nor excellent teachers preparing many students to excel in oral presentations. What I say is that for some reason, the key skill of oral communication does not take the forefront it should and seems to lack the core commitment to organize and agree upon the grammar of speaking in the same way there are many texts on the grammar of writing. Effective oral presentations in all fields should become a norm, especially as everyone gains a voice in our new digital age.

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