



Best Practices for Retaining Public Speaking Students

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Abstract: This article draws on existing communication research and praxes to share the best practices for retaining students enrolled in the introductory public speaking course. Among the many important pedagogical practices that communication scholars have documented, this article highlights the value of 10 best practices: instructor use of immediacy and confirmation; instructor inclusion of written prescriptive feedback, peer feedback workshops, low-stakes assignments, applied assignments, and individual speech preparation tools; and instructor participation in out-of-class communication, online office hours, and classroom-connectedness.

Coined as the discipline’s “front porch” (Beebe, 2013, p. 3), the public speaking course provides a gateway for students to the communication major. It often is the first communication course a student takes, it can act either as a recruitment tool or as a deterrent in choosing or continuing with the major, and it can play an integral role in college retention because students often reap benefits from the public speaking course (e.g., reduced communication apprehension, increased self-efficacy) that enable their success in other courses and, thereby, encourages their persistence across the entire college or university (Mahmud, 2014). Therefore, a fundamental goal of institutions should be to enroll and retain students in the public speaking course. To assist in attaining this goal, this article identifies 10 best practices for facilitating student persistence in the public speaking course.

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Best Practice #1: Engage in Immediacy

Immediacy—the verbal and nonverbal behaviors instructors use to create perceptions of closeness between themselves and their students—provides benefits which are well-documented within the instructional communication field. These benefits include improving student affect toward the subject matter, the instructor, and the course; increasing student interest; and improving student reports of cognitive learning (Richmond, Houser, & Hosek, 2017).

Essentially, students will listen more, learn more, and enjoy the course more when instructors engage in both verbal and nonverbal immediacy. Public speaking instructors can demonstrate verbal immediacy during lectures, discussions, activities, and student speeches by calling students by name, asking students questions, including personal examples, and using pronouns such as “we” and “us,” thus making the course seem warm and inclusive. They can do so nonverbally by making eye contact, smiling, using vocal variety, and moving around the classroom. Instructors should also discuss immediacy with their students and encourage them to practice immediate behavior during classroom activities, speeches, and discussions. Creating an immediate environment will assist students in feeling connected to, and comfortable in, the course.

Best Practice #2: Engage in Confirmation

Students need to know that they are valued and significant individuals in the classroom. This need can be accomplished through instructor confirmation, which consists of (a) responding to student questions and comments (b) showing interest in student learning, and (c) teaching in an interactive manner (Ellis, 2000). When responding to student questions and comments, instructors should listen attentively to their students, provide affirming responses, and answer all questions, whether asked before, during, or after class. Instructors can show interest in students’ learning by reinforcing what students do well with positive feedback, such as “Good job! I like how you have improved your eye contact from the last speech!” or “Wow! You really nailed your verbal citations!” stated verbally or written on a notecard and handed to students after they finish giving a speech. Instructors’ teaching style can provide confirmation through a variety of methods, including engaging discussion with verbal and nonverbal affirmation, interactive lessons, and incorporation of a variety of techniques that address all learning styles. Instructor confirmation might be especially helpful for public speaking students who are apprehensive, lack self-confidence, or are adjusting to the demands of college as a first-year student. Although it may be quick and easy to identify the issues students may have when giving a speech, instructors must be sure to address the positive issues as students who feel valued by their instructors will want to continue in the course.

Best Practice #3: Provide Written Prescriptive Feedback

Public speaking instructors must provide clear written feedback that describes what (and how) students can do to improve their next speech. Written feedback that is criterion-based, descriptive, and constructive can help improve student learning and performance (Simonds, Myer, Hunt, & Simonds, 2009). *Criterion-based feedback* stems directly from the requirements outlined on the grading rubric and is designed to help reinforce course expectations while detailing how students are meeting those expectations. *Descriptive feedback* explains what students are doing especially well in their speeches and

provides specific positive detail about these actions. *Constructive feedback* documents necessary speech improvements and provides specific recommendations to students about how to improve their speeches. For example, instructors might note that students should provide more eye contact. Comments such as “need more eye contact” or “look up” are not helpful, whereas comments such as “I would like to see more eye contact. I noticed you used ten notecards. Instead, let’s try six notecards for the next speech” or “I notice you do not look up much. I need to see eye contact 90% of the time. Try looking at each of your classmates. If that is too scary now, make a friend on each side of the classroom and look directly at them” provide specific actions towards improvement. Students who receive little feedback may feel hopeless and drop the course, while students who receive constructive feedback on not only what they need to improve—but also how they can improve—will be given the tools to help them succeed in the course.

Best Practice #4: Provide Peer Feedback Workshops

Instructors should consider using peer feedback workshops to help improve students’ speech performance. For example, one workshop could focus on showing students how to complete the public speaking process using an exercise created by Broeckelman, Brazeal, and Titsworth (2007). Instructors should ask for five volunteers, who move their desks into the shape of a circle in the middle of the classroom to create a fishbowl. The five volunteers are provided with a slip of paper that describes each person’s role in the exercise: (a) speechwriter, (b) bored group member, (c) praising group member, (d) disruptive group member, and (e) helpful group member. The volunteer playing the speechwriter role then simulates a peer feedback exercise by distributing a speech outline to the other four volunteers and asking them for feedback, at which point each volunteer plays the assigned (e.g., bored member, praising member, disruptive member, helpful member) role (see Broeckelman et al. for role descriptions). The group should role-play for about 3–4 minutes while the other students watch. Instructors then end the exercise, debrief it, and lead a discussion about the “dos” and “don’ts” of providing peer feedback. In subsequent peer workshops, students should work in three-member groups to review each other’s speech outlines or practice delivering their speech to each other (Broeckelman et al., 2007). During these (or any) workshops, instructors should float between groups to help the students stay on track and provide a debriefing session at the end of the workshop. If taking place outside of class time, instructors should ask for verification from a communication or learning center that the peer reviews occurred. Using workshops can provide students with feedback and connect them with each other, which will aid in their comfort with the course and ideally lead to retention.

Best Practice #5: Provide Low-Stakes Assignments

Low-stakes assignments can help students reduce anxiety and increase confidence (Shields, 2015), which can aid in course retention. One low-stake assignment is an outline exercise, where students bring a personal item to class that is important to them, complete a brief fill-in-the-blank outline (prepared by instructors ahead of time), and write and deliver a speech (based on the outline) to the class. Because students have the same outline and are talking about something they know well, they should feel more confident in writing and delivering their speech. Completing similar types of low-stakes assignments, especially in the beginning of the semester, can help students relax, build confidence, and improve their speaking skills.

Best Practice #6: Provide Applied Assignments

Applied assignments are an important component of any public speaking course because these assignments not only underscore the importance of the course and students' contributions to the course, but also allows students to learn about the different types of public speaking that they may use in their careers. Fedesco, Kentner, and Natt (2017) explained that when students believe that course assignments are relevant, their motivation increases because they feel like they are more connected to the material and they would be more likely to reuse the information. One way that instructors can make assignments seem relevant is by allowing them to select a "real world" genre in which they have great interest or passion (e.g., sermons, training seminars, closing arguments, political debates, or sales presentations; Docan-Morgan, 2009). Students will research the genre of the speech they pursue, which allows them to identify which details are necessary in the speech, create a rationale for the presentation, identify the audience, select the information that is necessary to include in the presentation, and understand the organization. With this type of applied assignment, Docan-Morgan (2009) suggested that students create the rubric for the presentation in order to allow for a deeper understanding of the expectations and requirements for the presentation type. Engaging students in topics and genres of which they have strong opinions and beliefs may increase their interest in the course, thus encouraging them to remain enrolled in the course.

Best Practice #7: Engage in Out-of-Class Communication

Public speaking instructors should engage in out-of-class communication (OCC) with students. OCC can take place electronically or in person, and such interactions can be initiated by faculty members or students. Instructors can engage in OCC by using e-mail, learning management systems, and early alert systems to check on students who are missing class sessions or not completing course assignments and to provide students with "kudos" or other types of accolades after course milestones such as their first formal speech. Conversely, students might engage in OCC by asking questions before or after class, during office hours, or via e-mail, thus affording instructors additional opportunities to help them succeed. It is best for instructors to create a classroom environment where students feel comfortable self-disclosing and going to their office (Fusani, 1994). Additionally, instructors should hold conferences outside of class time, which provide opportunities for students to meet one-on-one with instructors to discuss their upcoming speech, their course grade, or any other course-related or personal issues that they may have. OCC also offers students a safe space in which they can interact with their instructors.

Best Practice #8: Offer Online Office Hours

Because students often have jobs and families that leave little time for them to be able to meet with their instructors during regular business hours, public speaking instructors should consider offering online office hours—in addition to traditional office hours—as a way to increase student retention. Understandably, students have expressed a growing desire for virtual office hours (Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2013). These virtual office hours can be offered using a platform of their choice (e.g., Blackboard Collaborate, Skype, Facetime) during both regular business hours and in the evening, depending on instructor and student schedules. (A quick survey at the beginning of the semester can help determine the best times and venues in which to offer these hours.) Online office hours provide students with an opportunity to ask questions and solicit feedback; they provide professors the opportunity to engage further in teaching behaviors that are positively associated with student retention.

Best Practice #9: Provide Individual Speech Preparation Tools

Of the many individual speech preparation tools that communication scholars have amassed, one tool that instructors can have students use on their own time to help improve their in-class speech performance is imagined interactions (IIs), which within the context of public speaking, involves the process of imagining the speech itself (e.g., performing well on grading criteria, feeling confident) and the outcomes of the speech (e.g., receiving applause, receiving positive feedback) (Choi, Honeycutt, & Bodie, 2015). To do so, instructors must provide a brief four-step, IIs training session. First, instructors give students a handout that asks them to list three goals for improvement (e.g., make more eye contact with classmates). Second, instructors divide the class into four-member groups and provide each member with a brief ready-made speech about a trivial topic (e.g., a brief history of coffee, funniest college mascots). [Instructors can give the same set of four speeches to each group.] After students have had two minutes to read the speech, instructors then give them five minutes to engage in an imagined interaction of their short speech. During this five minutes, students should imagine themselves improving on the three goals they listed. Third, students take turns delivering their speeches in their small group as instructors move around the classroom. Fourth, instructors lead the students in a debriefing, reiterating the benefits of this speech preparation tool (e.g., improved performance), highlighting the importance of out-of-class speech preparation, and encouraging students to use IIs to prepare for their next speech.

Best Practice #10: Cultivate Classroom Connectedness

Public speaking instructors should strive to cultivate classroom connectedness, which is conceptualized as “student-to-student perceptions of a supportive and cooperative communication environment in the classroom” (Dwyer et al., 2004, p. 267). There are many ways to promote classroom connectedness, among which are offering students opportunities to establish common ground with each other, share stories and experiences, and bond as a group (Dwyer et al.). To establish common ground on the first day of the course, instructors might ask students questions such “Who is afraid of tripping on their way up to give a speech?” “Who is afraid of forgetting the words to their speech?” or “Who is afraid of making a mistake in front of the audience?”. Asking these types of questions informs students that many of them are experiencing the same feelings or issues. During the first week of class, instructors can allow students the opportunity to share their stories and experiences by providing a low-stakes introductory speech, such as the “Any Old Bag Will Do” speech (Buchanan, 1996). Contained in any other bag that they choose, students bring to class one item that represents their past, one item that represents their present, and one item that represents their future; they then speak for 1–2 minutes about the three items in their bag. This simple experience not only can ease students’ transition into public speaking, but also gives them the opportunity to get to know each other better, after which instructors can have them participate in additional low-stakes discussions and small group activities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to share 10 best practices for retaining public speaking students based on existing communication research. These recommendations were selected because they span a variety of methods that can assist students both inside and outside of the classroom. As such, these tips can help move students from the “front porch” of the discipline to further inside the walls of their college or university.

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