

## Teaching Presentation Skills in Online Business Communication Courses

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### Abstract

Oral presentations are often eliminated from online courses because of the logistics involved. Communication skills are central to success in any profession, and business is no exception. Merely exposing students to presentation concepts will not adequately address the need to help students develop their professional speaking abilities and presentation skills. Online business courses, like their face-to-face counterparts, should require students to prepare and deliver professional presentations. This paper discusses the specifics of using readily accessible technology (such as video hosting services) and proven pedagogy (including peer evaluations and instructional rubrics) to integrate oral presentations easily into online business communication courses.

**Keywords:** oral presentations, video submission, peer evaluations, instructional rubrics, video hosting

Online business courses often eliminate oral presentations from their curricula, which creates a serious void in a student's educational experience. Academics and practitioners have long agreed that communication skills are linked to professional effectiveness. Russ (2009) concluded that faculty must provide students with the communication skills demanded by employers. Campbell (2001) found that oral presentations skills must be mastered to have a successful professional life; Grez, Valcke, and Roozen (2009) concurred that higher education should address this skill as a key competency and Kennedy (2007) noted research from both business leaders and alumni claiming college graduates often lack adequate oral communication skills. Cronin and Glen (1991) confirmed this deficiency:

"Except for students majoring in communication, most undergraduates take at most one course emphasizing oral communication skills; therefore most non-speech majors have little or no opportunity to refine and reinforce their communication skills" (p.356).

Kennedy (2007) suggests minimizing this gap by embedding oral communication exercises across the curriculum while students are learning their discipline-specific subject matter. Dundes (2001) relayed alumni feedback that identified practice in oral presentations as the most prominent gap in their educational experience. Public speaking was rated one of the top two most-covered topics in business communication courses, as reported by a 2009 survey of 505 business communication instructors at 321 U.S. colleges and universities. Previous audits had reported a lower emphasis on public speaking which stresses the continued and growing importance of this skill (Russ, 2009).

### Growth of Online Programs

Since 2004, online enrollments have outpaced the growth of other higher education enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2010). In 2006-2007, 11,200 college-level programs were available to be completed totally online (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). A 17% increase in students enrolled in at least one online course was reported from 2007 to 2008, with more than one in four students enrolled in higher education taking an online class. Since 2002, overall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions has skyrocketed from 9.6% to 25.3%. The biggest growth occurred in 2005 with an annual growth rate of 36% (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Academic leaders at all types of institutions noted an increased demand for both new and existing online courses.

Despite this growth in demand, only 19% of institutions are offering training and mentoring programs for their faculty teaching online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). This deficit in faculty preparation may partially explain why chief academic officers report their faculty acceptance of online education has been slow to keep up with the tremendous growth in this arena. Between 2002 and 2009 the percentage of faculty who viewed online education as valuable and legitimate has only grown from 27.6% to 30.9%. Despite the

slow rate of faculty acceptance, 73.6% of public institutions recognized online education as being critical to their institutions' long-term strategies in 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). One way to address faculty concerns about the quality of online classes is to ensure critical competencies, such as public speaking skills, are being appropriately included in the curriculum.

Only 3% of institutions responding to a survey of business communication instructors indicated they offered an introductory business communication course entirely online as of 2008 (Russ, 2009). Traditional face-to-face business courses generally include at least one oral presentation in their curriculum, but this is not the case in most online business courses. Despite the documented importance of oral presentation skills, faculty often eliminate this component when business courses are taught online. The difficulty of teaching presentation skills online is one of the obstacles to developing an effective online business communication course. Given the rapid growth in online programs, this deficiency could have serious consequences for business graduates.

### **Proven Pedagogy in Teaching Presentation Skills**

According to the Australian Office of Learning and Teaching (2005) "Critical to any initiative in teaching and learning are the accompanying assessment practices: assessment is frequently the engine that drives pedagogy and curriculum" (p. 11). Developing an effective guideline to both communicate and clearly articulate measurement variables is often best accomplished through the use of a rubric.

Goodrich defines a rubric as "an assessment tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work or what counts (for example, purpose, organization, details, voice, and mechanics often are what count in a written essay) and articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor" (Andrade, 2005).

Andrade (2005) suggests that in addition to articulating quality criteria, rubrics are also useful in pointing out common pitfalls or deficiencies in school work. Stiggins (2001) builds on this idea, suggesting students become active participants in assessing their own learning. Arter and McTighe (2001) propose faculty list specific criteria that students must incorporate in their performance, thus providing "powerful instructional tools for improving the very achievement that is also being assessed...The idea is simple – teach students the criteria for quality and how to apply them to their own work to make it better" (as cited in Office of Learning and Training, 2005, p. 12).

Ross (2006) defines self-assessment as "the evaluation or judgment of 'the worth' of one's performance and the identification of one's strengths and weaknesses with a view to improving one's learning outcomes" (p. 1). Self-reflection offers a critical chance for improvement in many areas but is difficult to accomplish during oral presentations, unless a speech is recorded and therefore visible to the speaker. Jensen and Harris (1999) emphasize the benefits of using self-reflection as both a developmental and assessment tool primarily in the fields of writing and teacher education, but they also suggest its use is quickly spreading to other fields such as science. Jensen and Harris (1999) specifically apply this to public speaking by finding that after reviewing their own presentations and reading peer evaluations students recognize specific behaviors they need to incorporate or alleviate to perform better on future speeches. "The important point in this step is that students recognize what future behavior is needed to bridge the gap" (Jensen & Harris, 1999, p. 215). Students need to be trained to assess their own work and having well-defined instructional rubrics will make this task easier. Reliability and validity of self-assessment will be improved if the "rubric uses language intelligible to students, addresses competencies that are familiar to students, and includes performance features they perceive to be important" (Ross, 2006, p. 8).

"Experience must be followed by reflective thought and an internal processing that links the experience with previous learning, transforming the learner's previous understanding in some manner. Learning, therefore, takes place within a cycle that includes action, reflection, and application" (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009, p. 260). A model that incorporates the best outcomes for student presentations is one in which students make a presentation, receive specific feedback from multiple venues, and then make a second presentation incorporating learning from the feedback. Part of the students' self-evaluation after the second presentation might be to explain how they used information from the feedback after the first presentation to improve the second presentation.

Peers also provide powerful performance feedback beneficial to student improvement. Rust, Price, and O'Donovan (2003) discussed the benefit of peer assessment as a means of increasing students' interaction both with each other and with subject matter. Rust et al. found "significant improvement in student performance both shortly after the peer assessment experience and one year later" (p.162).

Mitchell and Bakewell (1995) found “where feedback is incorporated, performance is significantly improved and where peer review is used together with feedback from a tutor, the presentation performance is significantly better than with tutor feedback alone” (p. 361). Since Mitchell and Blakewell (1995) showed that incorporating peer reviews into an assessment cycle significantly leads to improved presentation performance by students, it was critical to incorporate this element into the process. Although Campbell, Mothersbaugh, Brammer, and Taylor (2001) found that peer and instructor ratings were strongly correlated, suggesting peer evaluations could serve as a substitute for faculty feedback, it seemed more prudent to consider it a supplement instead of a replacement for instructor assessment. In other words, it should be used to verify and reinforce rather than substitute for faculty judgment.

Although two articles provided a description of faculty using oral presentations in their online courses, neither used state of the art technology to allow input from peers. The first is a comparison of learning outcomes in a business communication course taught on-campus and online. In that article Jagel, Washburn, and Tollison (2005) describe asking students to video tape and mail their presentations for the instructor to grade. In the second article Czaja and Cummings (2010) describe the use of a competitive online case presentation in their graduate-level accounting foundation course but their assignment appears to be more of a shared slide presentation than a true oral presentation. It was the author’s intention to use a more traditional presentation complete with audio and visual components available for the instructor and peers to review.

### **Key to Successfully Implementing Oral Presentations in an Online Environment**

The mechanics of requiring online presentations using readily available technology and pedagogically sound strategies, such as self reflection and peer evaluation, are included in the next sections. In addition, obstacles that were experienced during the first two semesters along with solutions to overcome these problems are shared.

The subjects were twenty-five students enrolled in a junior level Managerial Communication course at a Midwestern university. As is typical in online classes, 18 of the students were living within 20 miles of campus and the other seven were true distance learners. All of the topics taught in the traditional on-campus class were incorporated into the online environment. By the end of the course all students had written a professional cover letter and résumé, prepared a written business report and three business letters. While students in the campus-based course gave two presentations in the classroom and received feedback from both their peers and the instructor, online students were required to post videos of three presentations visible to both the instructor and peers for comments.

After a two-semester trial-and-error period, a fairly easy process has been established to ensure this communication cornerstone is not overlooked in online business communication courses and the method can easily be transferred to other online and traditional face-to-face business courses. Students now give three oral presentations (one minute, three minutes and five minutes), which are uploaded to a university webhosting service and placed on the class website through a link in a threaded discussion. Previously, online oral communication courses required students to travel to campus for a *presentation day* or mail their video through regular mail channels; thus, the presentations were only visible to the instructor. In order for the video to be available for self, peer, and instructor review, assistance from the Center for Information Technology in Education (CITE) was needed. Although a video-hosting site had recently been added to the system, it was originally designed for faculty to share videos; students were specifically excluded from being able to post their own material. However the CITE office quickly agreed to open the venue to students for this assignment under strict controls. The basic benefit to this hosting service is that students are offered a confidential site for their videos. During the first semester all student videos were housed on this secure site.

After the first semester several students recommended supplementing our campus video hosting option with websites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Screencast, since they were readily available and students were familiar with this technology. If students were not concerned with privacy, they were allowed to use these established sites instead of the university service, which frequently experienced technical issues caused by large file sizes. The first semester videos were posted in groupings for the students to watch in order to provide their peer reviews, but this was a cumbersome process so this task was shifted to the students. Students now post a link to their own presentations in a threaded discussion where it is visible for their peers to review. As stated earlier, even though Campbell et al. (2001) suggest that peer evaluations can be used to replace faculty direction, the author’s pedagogical preference is to think of this feedback as supplemental in nature rather than as a substitute.

A rubric specifically designed for online presentations is used to guide the students as they prepare, present and critique their own and their classmates' presentations. Students are required to complete the rubric and send it to me before their submissions are graded. Most students seem to have a fairly solid grasp of their performance, so my ratings and feedback rarely come as a surprise. Peer feedback is shared on a threaded discussion board; students focus on both strengths and weaknesses of a presentation, as identified in the grading rubric. Neither the content of the self or peer assessment feedback is factored into the student grade; students simply receive points for completing and submitting the rubrics. Only my assessment of the presentation is used to provide a grade. The self and peer feedback are intended to be developmental in nature instead of evaluative. In a traditional class the peer feedback would be anonymous so I feared students would be hesitant to offer criticism; but this direct, open feedback still provides valuable suggestions. Students use the same rubric I use to score their own presentation and those of their peers. In addition, open-ended feedback is provided. Comments range from "your speech would have benefitted from more eye contact" to "I love how you used two different locations to keep my attention in your speech."

The first one-minute self-introduction presentation is not graded for quality, but is simply assigned points for mastering the technology needed to record and post a video upon submission. The second three-minute presentation is, however, assigned a score based on a variety of both content and style factors. Students are assigned a ranking of unacceptable, novice, apprentice or distinguished on each of these elements.

### **Obstacles Encountered**

The biggest obstacle experienced was that several students did not have access to equipment capable of recording and loading the presentations. I did not specifically warn students of this requirement the first time the class was taught. An email is now sent prior to the semester, so students are informed they will need access to equipment that can record a one-minute, three-minute and five-minute presentation. If they live close to campus, they can check the equipment out at the university library. During the first semester, 4 out of 27 students failed the course because they simply refused to prepare and post videos. After a pre-semester warning sent through a series of emails the second time I taught the course, only two students failed for not posting their videos. One student mentioned on his/her confidential student evaluation that he/she was ashamed of his/her appearance and felt it was unfair to require the posting so peers could evaluate his/her work.

Our campus video hosting system also experienced significant technical difficulties, which added to an already complicated assignment. One student noted

"I think the worst aspect of this class is that we could not depend on the school uploading system. It was a lesson that was learned fast and you adapted to the situation by allowing us to use YouTube. I think this was best because the site could handle the capacity and uploaded the videos faster, if the class had not had experience with YouTube before they were able to learn about it, and it was easier for us to watch multiple peer videos in order to comment on them."

Another obstacle was created by my lack of knowledge and direction for students regarding recording a professional presentation. Detailed suggestions (shown in Figure 1), developed after watching a few high quality student examples, quickly helped eliminate this problem. Posting previous-semester videos provided the second semester students a significant advantage over students who took the course the first semester.

### **Future Plans to Integrate into Other Online Courses**

Because presentation skills are a critical competency for business students, other online teachers should be encouraged to integrate an oral presentation unit into their online courses. Further research is needed to determine how best to incorporate this element so it is taught across the board; however, student comments on the end-of-semester evaluations indicate oral communication skills can be successfully taught online. One such comment follows:

"Overall I enjoyed the class. I learned the same, if not more than I would have learned in a traditional classroom setting and I think it made it easier to do speeches not having 20 eyes staring at you while you prepared and gave your speech."

Table 1. *Managerial Communication Oral Presentation Evaluation*

|   | <b>Distinguished</b>  | <b>Apprentice</b>   | <b>Novice</b>   | <b>Unacceptable</b>  |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Introduction</b>                       | Introduced established rapport and explained the purpose of presentation in creative, clear way capturing attention. Appeared poised and confident.                 | Introduced presentation in clear way. Slightly uncomfortable but attempted to establish rapport.  | Started with a self introduction or "My topic" is before capturing attention. May have looked down at notes to start.                       | Did not clearly introduce purpose of presentation. Clearly uncomfortable and nervous; failed to establish rapport with the group.  |
| <b>Vocal Qualities</b>                    | Clear strong voice (level 8) with vocal variation to demonstrate interest in the subject. Precise pronunciation of terms.   | Voice is clear but drops below level 8 at times; still uses vocal variation to show interest.   | Voice is soft or lacks vocal variation.   | Voice is both soft and monotone.   |
| <b>Eye Contact</b>                        | Maintains eye contact; seldom returning to notes; presentation is like a planned conversation. Speaker obviously prepared and has a solid grasp of the subject.     | Student maintains eye contact most of the time but frequently returns to notes. Speaker spent significant time preparing and appears at ease but doesn't elaborate. | Some eye contact, but not maintained and at least half the time reads from notes. Speaker needed more practice or knowledge of their topic. | Reads all or most of report with no eye contact. It is likely the speaker did not practice out loud. Unlikely the speaker would be able to answer questions about the topic. |
| <b>Gestures/ Posture</b>                  | Confident demeanor, gestures add to style, and hands are used to describe or emphasize.   | Confident demeanor; may need to add or subtract gestures to emphasize points.   | Slumping posture, hands stuck at sides or on podium OR Shifting weight or pacing.   | Slumping posture, hands stuck at sides or on podium AND Shifting weight or pacing.   |
| <b>Transitions</b>                        | Effective smooth transitions that flowed in a smooth manner.  | Included transitions to connect key points but relied on power robbers such as um, ah, or like.   | Included some transitions to connect key points but over reliance on power robbers was distracting.   | Presentation was choppy and disjointed with a lack of structure.   |
| <b>Organization &amp; Length</b>          | Subject was informative and easy to follow; time used efficiently. Within 20 seconds of allotted time.  | Within 40 seconds of allotted time. Most information relevant, some topics needed expansion or shortened.   | Within 1 minute of allotted time. Information was valid but not related enough to the purpose.  | Too long or too short. Information was not relevant to the audience.   |
| <b>Audience Attentiveness</b>             | Involved audience in presentation; held their attention throughout by getting them actively involved in the speech and using original, clever, creative approach.   | Presented facts with some interesting "twists"; held attention most of the time by interacting with them. Good variety of materials/media.                          | Some related facts but went off topic and lost audience. Failed to utilize method to pull the audience into the speech. Lacked originality. | Avoids or discourages active audience participation.   |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                         | Ends with an accurate conclusion tying the content back to the opening with a dynamic 25 words or less close. Transitioned into close so audience was ready for it. | Ends with a summary of main points showing some evaluation but over the 25 word limit. Transitioned to close.   | Ends with a recap of key points without adding a closing twist or ended abruptly.   | Ends with only a recap of key points prematurely.  |
| <b>Appearance of speaker and visuals.</b> | Completely appropriate for occasion and audience. Slides professional and easy to read.   | For the most part, appropriate for the occasion and audience. Slides contain too much or too little information.  | Somewhat inappropriate (hair keeps falling in eyes, jewelry distracting). Slides with typos.  | Inappropriate (sloppy clothes, excessive skin showing. Typos on slides.  |

- Get a friend to help you record this, it doesn't work nearly as well to put your camera on a table.
- Stand up and record from the waist up, don't just zoom in on your face, we can't see gestures if you do this.
- Be sure the volume is turned up as high as it can be.
- Have the plainest background possible (dark seems to work better than white walls), remove pictures from the wall if necessary or go to a public place to record. A lot of clutter in the background is just too distracting.
- If you have the ability to add light please do so.
- You can use visuals if you'd like; just have them prepared and instruct your camera person when to focus on the visual aid.
- You could add a very short video segment from the television, or flash to a PowerPoint slide you prepared (print it out as glare from the computer is distracting.)
- Record it until you get it right; this might seem obvious but students last semester told me they didn't think about doing this.

Figure 1. *Tips for Recording Your Presentation*

Another student stated, "I also did not like giving a presentation to a camera rather than a classroom, but I was glad that you had us give a presentation rather than not do any at all." And a third student summed it up well:

"I really enjoyed the presentations this summer because we weren't pressured to talk about a certain subject and I think that helps gain confidence in your public speaking skills. It was also a very easy task because the cameras were very easy to work with. I would highly recommend using that same tactic with future online courses."

Just exposing students to presentation concepts will not adequately address the need to develop students' professional speaking abilities. Online business communication courses should require students to prepare and present professional presentations. In addition, all online courses should consider adding such an element in an effort to teach professional speaking across the curriculum. The technology is readily available and proven pedagogy can easily be implemented to effectively accomplish this task. As online courses continue to be scrutinized for quality, important skills such as oral presentations can no longer simply be overlooked or eliminated from the curriculum because it appears too difficult or cumbersome to integrate into the class. I implore other faculty to investigate integrating an oral presentation component to their online offerings.

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