

Interdisciplinary Task Force Report on Assessing Oral Communication

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Introduction

The task force was asked to assess oral communication during the summer of 2013. In tackling the job, we quickly surmised a few things: 1) oral communication is important; 2) public speaking is only one kind of oral communication; 3) our data were exclusively comprised of oral presentations; and 4) much of the data were unusable for assessing oral communication broadly and public speaking specifically. Accordingly, we undertook to:

- Define what we mean by *oral communication* at Westmont College;
- Road test the rubric developed by the Communication Studies Department (relying on a rubric recommended by the National Communication Association), using the rubric jointly and individually to “norm” our responses;
- Assess a sample of oral presentations recorded during the 2012-2013 academic year, using the rubric;
- Discuss our findings; and
- Issue recommendations for further public speaking and oral communication assessment.

Initial Findings

Though we regard our findings as tentative due to the variability in kinds of data gathered, our own biases, and the larger question of what we count as oral communication, we noticed a pattern. Our graduating students appear to be more than competent in the areas of finding good supporting material for their speeches and in choosing and using appropriate language – appropriate for the audience, occasion, topic, and purpose of the presentation. We also note that students seem less able to clearly state a compelling thesis, less able to eloquently speak extemporaneously, and appear somewhat uncomfortable in establishing a physical presence and using their bodies to gesture purposefully and meaningfully. Mostly, we find that students appear to write very good research papers and spend very little time and thought planning an oral presentation based on their written work. Either presentations are much too casual, or consist of reading a paper. It was noted that whether in the natural sciences, the social sciences, or the humanities, good presentations involve persuasive story telling – whether telling a story about data, the economy, or an English poet, students need practice making

professional and compelling presentations that move an audience. All task force members agree that this is not usually accomplished simply by reading a research paper, talking to a projected slide, or casually chatting about lessons learned in a research or internship process.

Task force members also agreed, however, that these shortcomings do not rest solely or even largely on the shoulders of the students. Most syllabi and assignment prompts spent very little time explaining what was expected in an oral presentation, and when we could discern how much credit was given for an oral vs. written presentation, it was clear that most of the grade depended on the written paper, not on the speech. Finally, as a college, we provide very little in the way of training or resources for students to develop public speaking skills.

Thoughts on Oral Communication

As mentioned in our introduction, oral communication is a broad category, and public speaking is merely one aspect. As an overall goal for our graduates, being competent or even eloquent oral communicators requires many different kinds of skills and competencies in a variety of contexts. In key college documents, we desire that our graduates:

- ... possess interpersonal competence that enables them to listen respectfully, ask questions thoughtfully, self-disclose appropriately, give feedback honestly and sensitively, participate in dialogue, work with a group, and be characterized by tolerance and appreciation of differences.
- ... be so educated that they will bear a cultured and literate witness for the gospel, yet without arrogance or a sense of superiority. Thus, they will fill the need for educated individuals who can bear witness to the gospel by actively yet graciously carrying the righteousness and justice of God and the message of reconciliation into the larger community.
- ... have those writing, oral, and thinking skills necessary for career and vocational success, along with the ability to work cooperatively and effectively with others in both leadership and subordinate roles.
- ... have the skills, knowledge and motivation to be effective participants in the civic, charitable and cultural lives of their communities. (What We Want For Our Graduates)

Accordingly, it behooves us to think through the various kinds of oral communication skills, competencies, and virtues to which we aspire for our graduates. As a start:

There are occupational skills, norms, and competencies. Students learning to be good teachers must learn both speaking and listening skills, whether communicating with parents, teachers, students, or school boards. Students learning to present their research must learn how to discuss a poster as well as how to give a highly technical speech. Students in internships are learning particular communication requirements specific to an occupation, an organization, and a regional/cultural environment.

There are interpersonal skills, norms, and competencies. Students living in a residential environment are learning to listen well, offer advice, enter into meaningful dialogue, negotiate differences, and resolve conflict. Students interacting in class have different challenges – some learn how to speak less to allow others to enter the discussion, while others need to find their voices to speak into a conversation. Many students are learning how best to communicate with their professors. Beyond college, good communication skills (both speaking and listening) enhance and nurture healthy relationships with friends, neighbors, and family members,

There are civic and community-oriented competencies. There are opportunities for students to communicate beyond the campus, whether abroad on an off campus program or in the performance of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Planning, coordinating, and persuading foreign officials, outside donors, and other agencies requires good communication skills.

Of course *public speaking or presentational speaking* is an important skill for many professions, avocations, and civic roles in and beyond college. Increasingly, students must be skilled not only in orally presenting a carefully crafted argument, but also in designing a visual presentation to underscore and complement (rather than compete with or undermine) a speech.

Finally, there are many aspects of *performance* that involve training of the voice and body along with skills of memory and empathy.

To have one rubric to measure all of these kinds of oral communication, or to narrow the broad scope of “oral communication” simply to one kind of communication (i.e. public speaking), is neither feasible nor desirable.

***If we wish to avoid this artificial limit on
what counts as oral communication,
what might assessment look like?***

One thing we might do is assess the GE speech intensive courses. Do people obtain certain skills and competencies as a result of their GE speech intensive courses? This may be the purview of the GE committee working with departments offering such courses to assess the impact of these specific classes.

Another thing we might do is assess the larger aspiration that our graduates are competent oral communicators. To do this would require an interdisciplinary/interdepartmental effort by the Program Review Committee working with faculty across the curriculum. Some kinds of efforts to undertake might include:

- During the Annual Celebration of Summer Research, a team of faculty would engage each student presenter. Example: A faculty person approaches a student who's done summer research and is now standing in front of his/her poster that highlights the findings of the research. The faculty person asks the student to explain/walk through the poster. Some faculty should be in the same or an allied field and will listen for technical terms used correctly and be able to assess how well the student can articulate the research and findings. Another faculty person from a non-allied field can ask the student to explain the research to a layperson. Afterwards, all of the oral communication assessments can be discussed and faculty directing research will have both insider/outsider feedback on students' oral communication. At least one of the faculty doing the assessment should be on the PRC.
- When education/liberal studies majors present their portfolios, or when they do their student teaching, both teachers and faculty could assess the communication given the standards deemed appropriate to this field. At least one "outside" faculty person from the PRC should be part of the assessment and discussion.
- When internship supervisors send and receive evaluation forms for each student, they can be sure to include items that relate to oral communication (ability to ask questions, listening, etc.). Additionally, internship supervisors could invite PRC members and others (from outside professionals to faculty) to observe presentations of portfolios and final conclusions.
- When practicum students (such as in social work and psychology) interact with clients, children, etc. supervisors can specifically note aspects of oral communication (appropriate questions, good listening, nonverbal feedback in the face to face context,

appropriate speech/directives, etc.). It would not be feasible or ethical to have outsiders observe the interactions, but certainly supervisors can provide feedback.

- When student life staff and administrators are present for student-led meetings and sessions, they might assess the oral communication of the student leaders present, noting how well they conduct the meeting or session using specific skills involved both in directing conversation and in facilitating creativity.

When all of these data are in, departments, divisions, and individual professors will have a better idea of 1) what they're actually looking for; 2) what they're actually seeing and hearing; and 3) what they might do differently to prepare students for these kinds of oral communication situations.

This will also lead to identifying resource needs – such as speaking labs, practice rooms, instructional needs, and the like.

In terms of closing the loop, it would be worthwhile to have the faculty then articulate what we want to include in our aspirational language about oral communication, what we might realistically expect in particular courses, majors, and the GE, and how we might most helpfully both teach and then assess these things in the next assessment cycle.

To do this properly will require sustained attention, financial support, and a person who will be able to galvanize the faculty to action on this issue. We may well need an outside facilitator to help us through this – but we also need not wait to begin planning. The Program Review Committee might begin planning for the assessment now of the summer research celebration that takes place in September.

Assessing Public Speaking

Despite our conviction that oral communication is more than public speaking or presentation giving, we did assess several oral presentations given by students in the 2012-2013 academic year. The office for educational effectiveness had collected approximately 50 recordings of presentations (the number is unclear since there were some repeats). Of these presentations, we eliminated the casual presentations around the tables because they were very difficult to hear and seemed less formal (making the rubric almost irrelevant). We also eliminated the group presentations so that we could focus on one speaker at a time. Then in looking at some of the scientific presentations, we realized it was nearly impossible to follow the presentation

and rate it accurately if the recording did not include the visual aids or cut off large portions of the presentation. Also, some assignments included very creative role playing exercises which would certainly be fun to assess, but did not fit the notion of a speech given by an individual striving for personal credibility and competence as him or herself. Of the 27 individual presentations potentially available (fewer given the technological issues of recording), we coded 16. The presentations came from biology, chemistry, communication studies, English, history, internships, and music.

We started by discussing the rubric, then working through two presentations together and discussing them, and then by splitting up to do the rest of the work. Sixteen presentations may not sound impressive, but note that most of them were major honors theses and senior seminar research presentations, so they were in-depth and quite lengthy. Furthermore, the total number of presentations is 16, but keep in mind that five were used to check agreement (twice in a “blind” coding situation), so the total hours spent viewing and coding speeches far exceeds the number 16. Finally, all of the data were compiled and the task force members spent an afternoon discussing what was learned, what was gained, and what we might do in future for both teaching and assessment of public/presentational speaking.



Notes on the Rubric

The rubric was developed by the faculty in communication based largely on a model developed by the National Communication Association, as well as personal and professional experience grading speeches. This task force found the rubric to be generally helpful in assessing public speaking, in that the categories were deemed relevant, the form was easy to use, and the three possible “grades” were straightforward. We became aware of challenges in comparing scores (and in doing the scoring ourselves). Two things the rubric does not truly address are: 1) there is no space for Q&A – which is important not just in a presentation, but also as evidence of good listening skills as well as good speaking skills. Furthermore, the

recorded speeches often were cut-off before or in the middle of the Q&A sessions. And 2) we'd like to see a category for the overall result of the speech – do audience members or assessors feel moved, motivated, inspired, or drawn into new areas of research and knowledge? There was confusion/discussion/debate about where to properly note how well and whether an argument was fully developed – if a student only used 15 minutes of an allotted 25, were they missing a lot of supporting material? Of course, this would be challenging for an outside reviewer to know, given that outside reviewers are either totally unaware of or only marginally aware of the course context and assignment guidelines. Some other issues with regard to using the rubric include:

- The “language” section was perhaps not as specific as necessary to state that disciplinary language and terminology should be used (appropriately, of course, given the context, audience, purpose, etc.).
- It was easiest to rate delivery aspects (both vocal and physical aspects) across disciplines, and most difficult to assess evidence, organization, and stating a thesis across disciplines – one member noted that in some humanities presentations a delayed thesis is more artful than a statement up front, whereas that would be frowned upon in many disciplinary contexts.
- Though rated very highly, topic selection seemed like a “giveaway” category since students are given an assignment and then coached by the instructor as to appropriate topics for honors level research projects and senior seminar subjects.
- We might add to the “supporting” section evidence of higher order thinking, synthesis of information, or independent analysis; again, differences come into play since this may not be relevant for all kinds of presentations.

Notes on Agreement Between Coders

Agreement among coders was not impressive. Two pairs of coders differed on nearly every category. Another pair of coders differed on about 25% of the categories. Did we disagree because of the rubric, the presentations, or due to individual biases? After discussion, we surmised that:

We hesitated to assess thesis and supporting material items since we recognized that we were applying our own disciplinary lenses as well as our own personal biases to our engagement with the material. For example, in one presentation, the student gestured toward a line of poetry (presumably written on the board, but not in our view) to support a main point, so the

English professor counted that as “support” but the other members of the task force missed that gesture and thought that very little support or evidence had been offered. In another instance, a speech selected for blind reliability/agreement coding turned into a highly profitable discussion, since the person who rated the speech quite highly had been on the thesis committee, and had read the paper and attended the live presentation. The other rater, outside the discipline and division, had only the recorded presentation to rely on (and no specialized knowledge of the topic being discussed) and rated the speech quite poorly. How much difference was due to having read the paper, having detailed knowledge of the topic, or being a member of the live audience? And when assessing appropriate language, it was difficult for a non-scientist to know if the presenter was using current terms accurately and appropriately. There were also potential interferences from ordering – if one watched a truly excellent speech first, the subsequent speeches paled in comparison. And of course there are individual preferences.

Notes on Results

Though we are not entirely confident about our results given the agreement issues noted above, we nevertheless reached consensus on what we saw as the strengths and weaknesses of student presenters overall. Each speech was scored in seven categories using a scale of 1 (C- and lower), 2 (C-B range), or 3 (B+ to A+ range). Five speeches were scored by more than one coder for norming/interrater reliability; where scores differed, they were not included in statistical calculations.

Presentation Competencies	Mean	Mode
Topic Selection		
Communicating Thesis	2.00	2
Supporting Material	2.40	2
Organization	2.08	2
Language	2.60	3

Strengths

- The students seem readily able to find or be coached into good topic choices.
- The students seem able to find helpful and relevant supporting information, evidence, and illustrations.
- Students by and large dress appropriately and comport themselves professionally.
- Students put a good amount of time into writing out their thoughts and findings.

Areas Needing Improvement:

- Students don't put enough time into organization – they gather a lot of information and just present it (not thinking through how to truly engage the audience, how to best organize to impact the audience) – in some cases they simply read entire papers or excerpts from papers, and in other cases they simply read/describe their projected slides. This impacts everything from vocal delivery to being able to move an audience to care or act.
- Some students communicate the thesis clearly enough but fail to establish why the thesis needs defending, or fall short of communicating the thesis in a compelling fashion. Students need work on establishing the significance of the thesis - why it matters.
- Some overly rely on visual aids, but some don't use visual aids when they need them.
- Some students do not cite any sources, while others struggle to incorporate these sources properly. They need help in translating their sources/footnotes/references from a written paper into an oral presentation.
- Many students seemed stymied by their technology – it appeared that they'd not practiced in advance with their slides, computers, and projectors.
- As identified above, students don't usually include helpful (and basic) elements of a good speech, such as introductions, transitions, and conclusions, relying instead on the

content of a research paper or essay with little adaptation for an oral presentation with a live audience.

- Increasingly students seem to think that finding a video clip is a necessary part of giving a speech, that a clip is both required and counts as evidence. [This was observed more anecdotally than in the presentations observed for this analysis.]

In fairness, given that very few courses are designated and designed to be “speech intensive” it may be too much to expect that students will simply absorb good speaking skills without training, instruction, and practice. Some simple solutions for faculty may include:

Naming for students that teaching involves oral communication and public speaking skills, and that they should note what works well and what works less well as they observe their professors. None of their teachers simply read from a long list of prepared notes.

It is also important that instructors provide more guidance for students (and perhaps greater incentives and practice sessions) as to what makes for a good oral presentation. Some professors go out of their way to do this, including two professors in history and biology (and communication studies professors).

Recommendations for Future Public Speaking Assessments

For future assessment of public speaking it is absolutely vital that the data collection be undertaken in a systematic fashion – finding “like” assignments and obtaining complete assignment guidelines/prompts. Furthermore, we recommend that much of these assessments need to be done by division or discipline in order to fully assess aspects of evidence, thesis, support, language, etc.

Finally – any future data collection must involve explicit training of the technicians responsible for recording the presentations. It is imperative that:

- We obtain good sound and image quality; in some cases, microphones may have to be used.
- We see the visual aids being presented, especially when they provide the backbone of the presentation.
- We include any Q&A session for analysis. Listening to understand a question, thinking on one’s feet, and responding well are all part of good presentational speaking.

If we decide to analyze group presentations, less formal conversational reports, student teaching, role playing, debates, or other kinds of public communication, different rubrics should be developed and tested.

Overall Recommendations

We recommend that the college consider the following actions to improve oral communication skills broadly and public speaking skills specifically:

- Provide more explicit prompts in syllabi and assignments as to what is expected.
- Provide explicit and direct training, coaching, and modeling for younger students in how to participate in college-level discussions in general, and more explicit training, coaching, and modeling in senior level disciplinary seminar courses.
- Provide a speaker's resource center (perhaps modeled on Writers' Corner) that provides physical space as well as peer coaches for practicing speeches and presentations.
- Provide "best practice" materials for both students and instructors, outlining various models and organizational patterns for presentations as well as helpful rubrics, explanations, and assignment language.
- Provide exemplars for students (one of the chemistry presentations was so well done in the opinion of the rater, that he will ask the former student for permission to make the recording available for other students in allied disciplines).
- Require each department to think through and explicitly develop what kinds of oral communication skills are necessary for the discipline and allied careers (good listening for family counselors, argumentation skills for lawyers, etc.); then to think about how best to introduce and model these skills and sensibilities in the department in a variety of courses.
- Develop specific oral communication assessment tools that go beyond public speaking and presentations, but also be very deliberate, systematic, and technologically savvy in collecting the data for future public speaking assessment. Each recorded presentation should record the entirety of the speech, including introductions, conclusions, the question & answer session, and visual aids (especially charts and graphs). Perhaps a

scan of the audience would be helpful in some contexts. Proper lighting and sound must also be attended to.

- Outline what good participation looks like in a college level classroom and include these descriptions in course syllabi where appropriate. One good example was found in Eileen McMahon's syllabus for her upper division biological literature seminar.
- Think through how we can help women express themselves with more professional confidence whether in formal presentations or informally in class discussions. The Program Review Committee (PRC) might partner with the Women's Leadership Initiative in this task.

Specific Suggestions for the Program Review Committee

We highly recommend that the Program Review Committee require and encourage all disciplines, departments, and co-curricular program areas of the college (including student life, athletics, and off-campus programs) to articulate what they want for their graduates in terms of oral communication – for *the church, the academy, and the world*. As we've mentioned elsewhere, public speaking is an important element of working and living in our culture, though there are many other kinds of oral communication that are equally, if not more, important in terms of vocational success, life happiness, and civic duty.

We also highly recommend that the PRC and the GE committee immediately make plans to:

- Assess oral communication during the September "Celebration of Student Research."
- Discover whether existing NSSE or HERI or other surveys may measure aspects of oral communication.
- Consider surveying all courses taught / instructors of record to identify what **is** being taught with regard to oral communication. This survey could be modeled on the coauthored question set on writing developed by WPA as a NSSE survey add-on (used during Westmont's recent GE writing assessment). Such questions provide valuable descriptive data as evaluative tasks are designed and implemented.
- Hire a consultant to help faculty and staff think about developing communication skills across the curriculum. Sarah Skripsky has suggested Chris Anson, Ph.D. (University Distinguished Professor and Director of Campus Writing and Speaking Program at

North Carolina State University); the communication studies department may also have recommendations.