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GIFTS: Students as Learners, Teachers, Critics, and More

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The activity is intended for Public Speaking classes, but it can be used in any (communication) course where students make oral presentations.

Activity Description

The main goals and objectives of this activity are to:

1. Create a friendly learning-teaching environment for students.
2. Give students a chance to be learners, as well as teachers, critics and more in the classroom.
3. Help improve student's public speaking skills through peer observations.
4. Help students to speak in public with greater confidence.

Pedagogical Rationale

Public Speaking is one of the core courses that I teach at St. John's University (SJU) in Queens, New York. Both the University and Queens County are known for their ethnic and cultural diversity, which is also reflected in the classrooms. Almost all incoming freshman students at SJU are required to take Public Speaking during their freshman year. Since these students just graduated from high school, they are unfamiliar with "university culture" in general, they hardly know anyone on campus, and they are overwhelmed with their responsibilities as university students. Further, and like most people around the world, they have fear of speaking in public, making the required course not quite appealing to them. The suggested activity titled "Students as Learners, Teachers, Critics, and More" is designed to help make the classroom a pleasant environment for students to overcome their stage fright, not only through lectures and speech assignments, but also through peer observations, reflections, and casual discussions following each speech assignment.

Procedure

In the beginning of the semester, I ask each student to help the class to get to know them by both introducing themselves and by placing a nametag on their desk for two weeks. Throughout the course, students make seven speeches, and the following is what we do for each speech:

- 1) About 10 students (half the class) make their speeches while the other half serve as audience members and judges/critics.

- The audience members take notes while listening to each speech. They write down each speaker's name followed by a list of comments on their presentation (i.e., what they found effective regarding the speech content and delivery).
- 2) At the end of the speech presentations, all students sit in a circle so they can see their classmates as they offer feedback.
- Audience members ask the presenters questions (e.g., clarification, additional information) regarding their speech content.
 - Audience members provide the presenters feedback about their speech delivery (e.g., "Joshua, I found your hand gestures very effective"; "Sarah, you did not look nervous at all"). (Note: to save students face, I do not ask for comments on the perceived shortcomings of the speeches. Instead, I include them in my written comments to the student.)
 - Each presenter reflects upon their speech and points out what they think worked or did not work for them, and why (hence an opportunity to learn from their mistakes).
 - While still sitting in a circle, the entire class is encouraged to continue discussing any of the speech topics that they found particularly interesting (racism, high cost of tuition, gender and communication, etc.). Thus students have a chance to express their ideas, test their perceptions of the world, learn more about a topic, as well as casually practicing their public speaking skills.

Overall, the activity helps students to learn the significance of different aspects of communication through practice; it increases their self-confidence by both critiquing their peers' speeches and receiving positive comments from them. Further, face-to-face communication (whether through introducing them, providing feedback, or casually discussing a topic with the class) serves as a form of socialization that often leads to emotional closeness among them which can help to overcome stage fright. Such a casual interaction with classmates can potentially help students in other ways as well (e.g., long-term friendship, studying together).

Typical Results

Based on students' feedback and my own observations, the activity helps them to:

- Reduce their nervousness about public speaking if not overcome their stage fright.
- Socialize with and learn from classmates through face-to-face communication, which has greatly been diminished in today's digital society.
- Have a friendly and joyful learning environment where they can feel safe to express themselves.
- Gain more confidence to speak publicly, in classroom or other settings.
- See themselves not only as students/learners, but also as critics who can help improve their classmates' public speaking skills.

How to debrief the activity

- How did you like exchanging feedback with your classmates?
- How did the activity affect your perception of your classmates?
- What do's and don'ts did you learn from observing and critiquing your classmates' speeches?
- How did the face-to-face communication with your classmates affect you and your relationship with the class?
- How did the activity affect your perception of public speaking?
- How did the activity affect your perception of yourself as a public speaker?