

Chapter 34

Teaching and Learning to Communicate: Methods for Developing K–20 Students’ Presentation and Communication Skills

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ABSTRACT

Effective presentation skills and communication competence are important developmental qualities for teachers’ professional success and K-12 students’ learning. Yet identifying the definitive qualities and methods to practice and evaluate those skills has had minimal emphasis in current education programs. In addition to traditional abilities such as making clear presentations, speaking well, and articulating an argument, K-20 learners are faced with an explosion of options for accessing, organizing, and presenting information using technology. This study documents methods for college-level instruction and assessment of presentation skills, which serve as evidence of preservice teachers’ readiness to demonstrate effective communication skills for K-12 student learning. The report summarized in this chapter tracks two years of creating and evaluating methods for promoting professional presentation and communication skills, and includes rubrics focused on the development and evaluation of those skills.

INTRODUCTION

Assumptions about the presentation skills and communication abilities of teachers vary widely and include the supposition that college preparation will prepare graduates to be successful communicators. This chapter shares the research

outcomes of an instructional approach for promoting communication skills for pre-professionals; results of the study indicate a more deliberate approach to presentation skills goals might yield greater benefits. For instance, in recent iterations of teacher dispositions identifying personal qualities an effective teacher must possess, a common

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category is “good communication skills” (SUNY, 2003, p. 27). Yet the literature on how to address those skills and promote effective teacher-communicators is equivocal, and the means for evaluating such skills is generally absent from program guidelines.

In addition to exhibiting good presentation skills, teachers also must communicate in many contexts. The ability to access information and adapt communication styles to match the context is critical for smooth professional interaction. Effective communicators must be able to adapt comprehension and interaction skills to interpersonal, intrapersonal and small group venues; they must adapt to different roles and relationships, including those with college students and teaching peers, K-12 students in internships and student teaching classrooms, and the parents of those students (Luterback, 2011). Successful preservice teachers must effectively communicate with host teachers and administrators, and with college supervisors and faculty, while also adapting to the new contexts they experience in public schools. In addition, they must develop skills in presenting to more formal audiences in various contexts. Teachers’ and teacher candidates’ communication errors can result in irreparable mistakes, uncomfortable relationships, and lost learning opportunities.

This chapter summarizes methods used to teach university-wide presentation skills to pre-professionals, specifically, pre-service teachers in a practicum course before student teaching. We identified critical issues that distinguish and promote strong communication for teachers, and by extension, the application and nurturing of communication skills for K-12 students (Long, 1994). We developed a rubric for effective communication skills to promote and evaluate desirable teaching qualities, including: professional language and communication style, practice for parent interaction, interview and resume qualities, K-12 student communication, peer communication, self-reflection, receptiveness to correction and evaluation, teacher voice and writing skills.

The pre-service teacher’s ability to understand and demonstrate strong communication skills is considered another tool in the professional teaching repertoire. In addition to analyses of different contexts and appropriate communication styles, the study process modeled typical classroom scenarios to practice effective responses. Role-playing and practice promotes confidence in the pre-professional; students practice their unique and effective communication response skills in class and can apply it in practicum situations. In addition to their own development of effective communication skills, teachers must also be able to lead their students in both learning to communicate and using the burgeoning electronic and technological methods available for learning (Luterback, 2011; McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2002).

Exercises and class activities emphasized and familiarized students with the different communication skills and techniques, yet we were careful not to stifle their unique styles of interacting and speaking. The best preservice teacher becomes the best professional by practicing, understanding and honing unique communication qualities, which result in confident articulation of information.

In this study, university-wide presentation skills were taught to preservice teachers in conjunction with a practicum course before student teaching. The study examined both traditional rhetorical issues and implementation techniques that distinguish and promote strong communication in the teaching-learning paradigm.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Effective Speaking, Good Communicators

To address effective communication practices, a brief examination of philosophies of good speaking and rhetorical history reveal considerations for pre-professional students. Philosophers,

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