

Speaking to Learn

Research shows that communicating about course content deepens learning and engagement and facilitates student success. While this is most often discussed in the context of **Writing to Learn**, Speaking to Learn can be just as impactful, and sometimes dovetails more closely with your learning goals for the day or the course. Indeed, students are probably already speaking to learn in your courses, and it might take just a few small adjustments to ensure it's happening as strategically as possible.

When students speak to learn, they are **performing their understanding**, engaging in disciplinary conversations, and **building a classroom community** of shared learning. Especially at colleges with communication-across-the-curriculum programs that feature high-stakes oral communication assignments, speaking to learn plays an essential role in both content mastery and preparedness.

Examples of Speaking to Learn assignments

- **Whole-class discussion** organized around strategically crafted discussion prompts elicits performances of understanding.
- **Group work** organized around strategically crafted discussion prompts and careful guidelines for time management gives students opportunities to speak more often than can be achieved in whole-class discussion.
- **“Think, Pair, Share”** provides an opportunity to write before speaking, first in pairs and then with the whole class, thereby scaffolding communication about course content.
- **Reading summaries** can be delivered at the start of class on a rotating basis, providing students with an opportunity to practice concise content delivery.
- **Discussion responsibilities** meted out to students, such as coming to class with discussion questions about the reading or summing up a mini-lecture at the end of class, authorize students to master a module of course content, and facilitate student-to-student interaction.
- **Individual or group presentations** are higher-stakes opportunities for students to perform their understanding of course content.
- **Debates**, whether prepared or impromptu, elicit performances of understanding and deepen engagement with course content through deliberation, civic engagement, and extemporaneous argumentation.

References

Elbow, Peter. *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
Smith, Gary. “Learning to Speak and Speaking to Learn.” *College Teaching*, vol. 45, No 2, 1997, pp. 49-51.

See also

Building Classroom Community
Performances of Understanding
Writing to Learn