

Seminar on Supporting Communication Skills in the Zicklin Majors



Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute

Seminar Goals

Our goal is to support you, faculty in the Zicklin School of Business, with **tools and strategies**

To make your classes, as large and technical as they sometimes are,

places where students learn **through** writing and speaking

and develop as effective communicators for success in their careers and lives.

You might be thinking...

Emphasizing writing and speaking will take time away from content

Adding more writing and speaking to my course will bury me in paper grading

I am not knowledgeable enough about writing and grammar to help students with their own writing

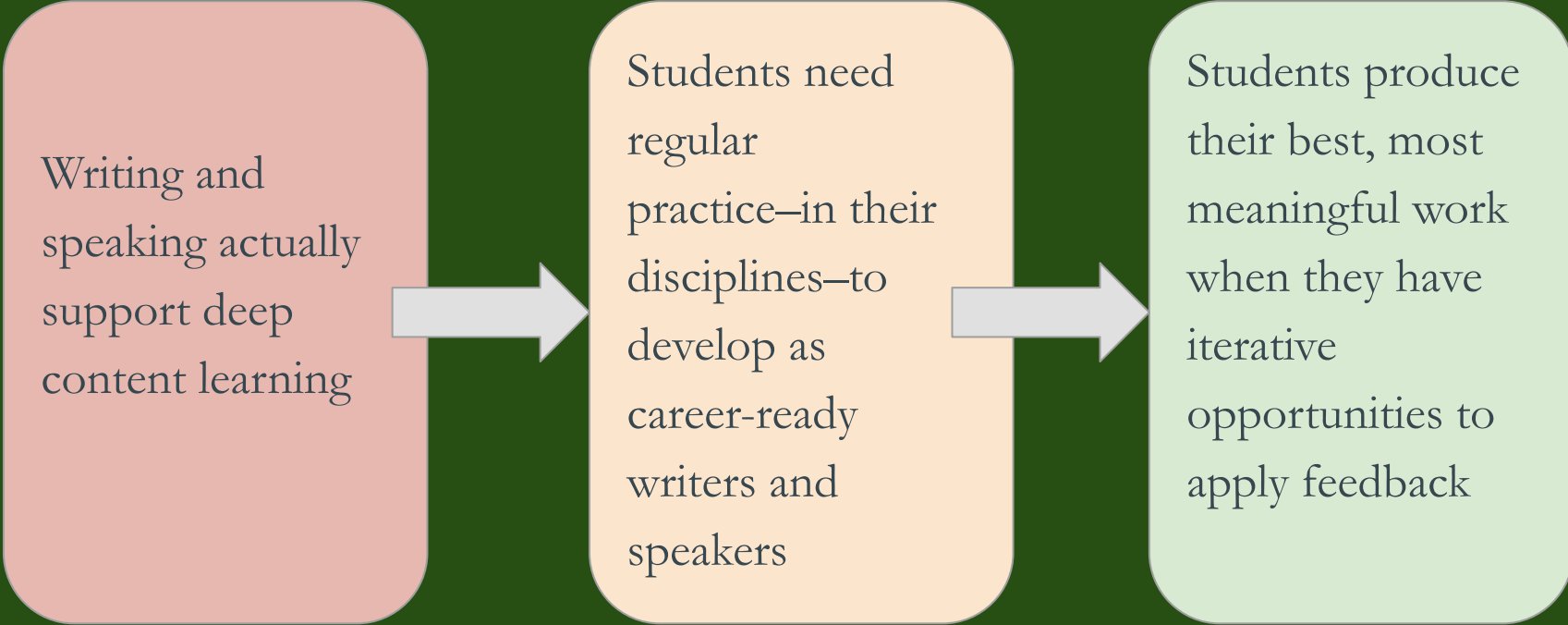
List adapted from John Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*

We hear you. And...



Our Big Claims: Student Learning

Writing and speaking actually support deep content learning



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graph LR; A[Writing and speaking actually support deep content learning] --> B[Students need regular practice—in their disciplines—to develop as career-ready writers and speakers]; B --> C[Students produce their best, most meaningful work when they have iterative opportunities to apply feedback]
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Students need regular practice—in their disciplines—to develop as career-ready writers and speakers

Students produce their best, most meaningful work when they have iterative opportunities to apply feedback

In others' words:

“The mere process of writing,” explains [physicist James Van Allen, author of more than 270 scientific papers], “is one of the most powerful tools we have for clarifying our own thinking. I seldom get to the level of a publishable manuscript without a great deal of self-torture and at least three drafts. My desk is littered with rejected attempts as I proceed. But there is a reward. **I am never so clear about a matter as when I have just finished writing about it. The writing process itself produces that clarity.** Indeed, I often write memoranda to myself solely for the purpose of clearing up my own thinking.”

Quoted in John Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (pp. 120-121)

Our Big Claims: Faculty Workload

Students can learn without always receiving individualized professor feedback or even grades



Buy-in and compliance can be achieved with some strategy



You don't need to be an expert teacher of writing and grammar to respond effectively!

In others' words:

“In low-stakes assignments, I am typically not concerned with grading. To increase student engagement, I might incorporate the low-stakes assignment into a high-stakes assignment. I also try to build the activity such that the student receives feedback from at least another student. [...] Students typically welcome the opportunity to do something besides just listen to the teacher. The issue is getting them to do the preparatory work. This is why this works best if incorporated as part of a higher-stakes assignment. This convergence of goals ensures that most of the class actually does some of the work at least.”

Selected Works Consulted

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- Zawacki, Terry Myers, and Paul M. Rogers (Eds.), *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Critical Sourcebook*. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012.

Seminar Overview

Day 1: Low-stakes Writing and Speaking

- Model low-stakes assignments
- Developing a feedback strategy, securing student buy-in and engagement

Day 2: Higher-stakes Assignment Design and Scaffolding

- Model scaffolded, higher-stakes assignments, adapted for real-world contexts, large classes, and deeper engagement
- Designing effective group work

Day 3: Responding, Grading, and Managing Workload

- Identifying what communication skills matter most to you/your discipline/the professions
- Using rubrics, comment banks, peer review, and more

Seminar Overview

Post-Seminar: opportunity for individualized support toward your goals

- During Spring, Summer, or Fall semesters

Seminar Context: New Approach to Communication-Skills Development in the Zicklin Majors

COM 2020 and
COM 3021

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graph LR; A[COM 2020 and COM 3021] --> B[Department-specific approaches to furthering opportunities for practice and context-specific communication]
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Department-specific approaches to furthering opportunities for practice and context-specific communication

Our invitation to you



Suspend your disbelief

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What is Low-Stakes Writing and Speaking?

- Writing- and speaking-to-learn activities
- In and outside of class
- Spectrum of formality

Responding to Low-stakes Assignments

Some tried-and-true strategies to consider:

- Do nothing!
- Give credit for completion
- Skim and announce whole-class patterns
- Have students respond to each other's work briefly in pairs
- Have students perform self-assessment with a rubric
- Share model student work, identifying particular strong features and moves
- Rotate your responses and/or grading so that for each assignment, you only process a handful of students
- Respond to whole conversations held by many students, rather than to individual student contributions
- Experiment with audio for feedback

Practical Approaches to Collecting Low-Stakes Communications

Depending on modality and goals, you might collect responses via:

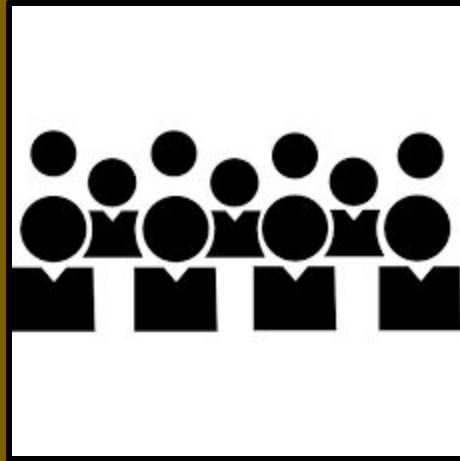
- Slips of paper or index cards
- Chat waterfall
- Polling software with free-response option (anonymous or not)
- LMS quiz feature with free-response option
- LMS journal feature or similar solution
- LMS discussion boards

Achieving Buy-in

To establish a culture of engagement:

- Initiate a pattern early
- Share transparently your purpose and values
- Communicate an intentional feedback plan
- Reflect on and model your own writing/speaking-to-learn practices
- Connect low-stakes activities to class discussion, groupwork, and higher-stakes projects
- Elevate thoughtful responses
- Craft authentic prompts

But remember...



Variety in student engagement is normal

Independent Work Prompt

Do some private writing in response to the following:

- **Identify a specific area in your course** that you especially want to help students engage with more deeply (e.g. a theory they misunderstand, a reading they gloss over, a technical approach they bungle, a skill that could use development). Be as specific as you can about your goal for student learning!
- **If you've already implemented low-stakes writing or speaking** around this task, what does it look like? What is successful, and what are you still unsatisfied with? How might you tweak this activity to enhance effectiveness?
- **If you haven't yet used low-stakes writing or speaking** around this task or skill, what's a strategy that might help you do so? Brainstorm a possible prompt.

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Scaffolding student learning: Structures of support you design – activities, assignments – to give students opportunities to practice

What am I hoping students master in my course? What are the high-stakes deliverables meant to reflect that mastery?

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graph LR; A[What am I hoping students master in my course? What are the high-stakes deliverables meant to reflect that mastery?] --> B[What are some smaller, progressively complex activities I can design to support students' development toward those goals and assignments?]; B --> C[This might be in-class writing, proposals, casual presentations, drafts, or practice in specific skills (e.g. summary, recommendation based on evidence, etc.)];
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What are some smaller, progressively complex activities I can design to support students' development toward those goals and assignments?

This might be in-class writing, proposals, casual presentations, drafts, or practice in specific skills (e.g. summary, recommendation based on evidence, etc.)

For example, scaffolding as practice for a high stakes deliverable

High stakes group final presentation

Analysis of quantitative dataset to make recommendation to senior management about next steps. Presentation should include graphical representations of data.

1. In-class writing and speaking

Every week, set aside 5 minutes for exercises e.g.: using a dataset, brainstorm three possible recommendations and write a one-sentence claim in support of one; or, take turns speaking to a partner to explain a formula's purpose.

2. Group data viz drafts

Define interim deliverables for each data viz component of the assignment, accompanied by a memo that outlines 1) the graph's key takeaway, 2) a question the group has, 3) the group's intended next steps

3. Independent and group presentation practice

Each student does an independent run-through of their part, and on a blackboard discussion board, reflects on strengths and areas for improvement; the whole group then rehearses and coaches one another accordingly.

Or, another example, this time with no final deliverable

Goal: perform audit and communicate outcomes

1. Mini audit and client memo #1

2. Mini audit and client memo #2

3. Mini audit and client memo #3

Over the course of the semester, students will regularly practice components of an effective audit; they'll also practice audience-aware, actionable, clear communications to hypothetical clients.

A month into the semester, a unit concludes with a mini audit focused on a limited skill set; students submit outcomes with a max 250-word memo to the client that communicates hard news clearly, and identifies action steps.

Students complete the same assignment with a new, slightly more complex set of data, applying lessons learned from the first memo.

Later in the semester, students complete a third audit and client memo with a complex data set.

This might synthesize several skill sets or simply focus on a new skill.

Assignment Design Guidelines

To ensure the strongest possible work:

- Provide clear purpose and rhetorical context (e.g. in order to convince a CFO of your proposed implementation plan)
- Consider short-form and real-world genres
- When assigning group work, provide guidelines and structure to facilitate their success

Core Strategies for Effective Group Work

Group work is most productive when instructors:

- Design tasks that tackle the most challenging learning goals
- Build in authentic interdependence
- Talk directly about value of collaboration, teamwork, and diverse perspectives
- Structure interactions

Independent Work Prompt

Choose a goal that feels most productive to you right now:

- If you have a higher stakes assignment you're satisfied with, begin to plan out a new or revised way you might scaffold learning across the semester, especially toward the communications skills.
- Or, if you want to add or revise a communications assignment based on something you've just seen, sketch it out—what might it look like?
- Or, you might want to develop—or update—a plan for a group activity. What will you task your students with? How will it call upon students to collaborate? How will you structure their interactions?

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Revisiting Our Big Claims: Student Learning

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Enduring Challenges

1. How can I create small amounts of time in my content-heavy class for low-stakes writing and speaking activities without sacrificing content?

2. How can I get students writing- and speaking-to-learn in my online synchronous class (w/ no video cameras on!)

3. How can I get students writing and speaking in my 200+/totally asynchronous course?

4. Low-stakes writing/speaking and short, real-world genres are not the culture in my department! How do I achieve buy-in among students (and maybe even influence other faculty in my department)?

How can I create small amounts of time in my content-heavy class for low-stakes writing and speaking activities without sacrificing content?

- Identify chunks of content to deliver asynchronously, with quizzes/checks for accountability
- Task students with delivering small amounts of content (small groups, jigsaw, short presentations, etc.)
- Keep activities short and make them a regular feature of your weekly routine – remember that 2-5 minutes of private writing or partnered talking won't take up much class time

How can I get students writing- and speaking-to-learn in my online synchronous class (with cameras off!)?

- Value student engagement in many forms; free-form discussion is just one of many ways to engage and participate
- Bring high structure and accountability to small-group discussions (fishbowls, breakout room prompts with deliverables, rotating mini-presentations)
- Require participation in in-class polling and free-form responses (Poll Everywhere, Mentimeter), synchronous work on Google Docs, etc.

How can I get students writing and speaking in my 200+/totally asynchronous course?

- Stick with very short/low-stakes opportunities for writing and speaking
- For scaffolding, share class trends and guide students through self-review
- Use recurring groups to build small communities
- Students post and respond to introduction videos (and post your own!)
- Assign group discussion boards
- Assign very short oral comm assignments that students post via video
- Post your own videos discussing trends in student work, highlighting strong examples

Low-stakes writing/speaking and short, real-world genres are not the culture in my department! How do I achieve buy-in among students (and maybe even influence other faculty in my department)?

- Discuss your teaching style; explain the purpose of everything!
- Add writing- and speaking-to-learn components to standard course assessments (e.g. exam wrapper)
- Share ideas with colleagues; talk with course coordinators; propose assignment options and alternatives
- Loop us into these conversations if helpful!