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ABSTRACT

Speech communication students and faculty at California Polytechnic State University, where the university motto is "Learn by Doing," take their skills and training beyond the classroom and reach out to diverse audiences by doing speaking. Members of the "student host" corps need to be quick, prepared and diplomatic as they greet visitors and conduct tours of the campus. Communication faculty offer workshops in communication skills for students from other majors and schools on campus. Faculty also serve as trainers and developers for faculty in other departments, especially to colleagues from business and agriculture. Students engage in a campus speech tournament. Every student at Cal Poly must complete a senior project--a culminating activity of some sort related to the major. Often conducted off campus, the senior project serves as a bridge from campus to community applications. One student is involved in the Academic Decathlon program, coaching students from a small local high school on interview and speaking skills. Other off campus projects include doing personnel audits for local businesses, developing high school speech communication activities workbooks, and presenting Lincoln-Douglas debates at local service and civic clubs. These "learn by doing" activities present an opportunity for students and faculty to reach out beyond the classroom and apply what they have learned in the classroom to the larger community. (RS)

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Learn By Doing: Practical Applications
On and Off Campus

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Learn By Doing: Practical Applications

On and Off Campus

Introduction

The California Polytechnic State University motto, "Learn by Doing," has a variety of effects when presented to faculty members on the campus. Those in technical areas which are emphasized in the "polytechnic" part of the name, point to the motto as if it were a philosophical statement of greatest import. Others, especially from the liberal arts areas, may scoff at it, reading it as a sign of the "manual arts mentality" of the other units on campus. Certainly one place where these extremes may meet is in the application of any skills-related course. The writer learns by doing papers, the critic learns through engaging in criticism, the philosopher learns by solving problems or applying ideas to ethical choices. The speaker learns by speaking.

This paper will review some of the ways speech communication students and faculty at Cal Poly take their skills and training beyond the classroom and reach out to diverse audiences by doing speaking.

Several unique features of the campus will be covered first, as student activities create an arena for applied communication

skills. Then, some of the off-campus projects our speech communication students undertake will be discussed.

On Campus Applications

Cal Poly is like many other campuses in that it offers a student speakers bureau. Speech Communication students may be participants or the speakers may come from other majors. Because a course in public speaking is required of all majors as a condition of graduation, in the largest sense, speech communication functions whenever any of our students is called upon to do campus presentations. More specific examples, however, focus specifically on our departmental contributions.

Cal Poly has a "student host" corps, called "Poly Reps," who greet visitors and conduct tours of campus. A highly selective group, Poly Reps each year gets scores of applicants to fill a dozen or so vacancies. While not exclusively populated by Speech Communication majors, a large number come from that pool, many others are minors. This group usually conducts 10--20 visitors -- often prospective students and their parents-- on guided tours of the campus that may last up to two hours. They must not only explain the campus layout, but are responsible for answering many questions about the campus. In addition, it is not unusual for parents to inquire about housing arrangements, safety issues, drug and alcohol abuse, and matters of personal reactions, likes and dislikes of the student conducting the tour. Poly Reps must be more than glib presenters of a standard tour spiel. They need to

be quick, prepared and diplomatic when representing the campus to the public.

A second influential application of skill training comes in establishing links to other majors and schools on campus. The School of Agriculture has nearly 4,000 students, and leadership training is an important dimension for the school in the development of their students. Whenever you find leadership, can communication training be far behind? For dozens of years, Cal Poly hosts the statewide Future Farmers of America state convention as well as offering training sessions for the state officers. For six years, I was responsible for running a one day workshop for these students during the summer. In a video-feedback intensive setting, I would work with 8 student statewide leaders on presentation skills. In addition, the School of Agriculture has over a dozen student clubs. The School hosts a one day workshop for all the officers of these clubs, and regularly features faculty from Speech Communication lecturing on impromptu speaking and communication skills. Students are also used in these sessions as resources if they have had the basic course, or other significant speaking experiences. In fact, given the prominence of public speaking in FFA activities, many of these students are good instructors themselves and help to orient other students.

A third area focuses on faculty development on campus. Several members of the Speech Communication department serve as trainers and developers for other departments, especially to colleagues from Business and Agriculture, as well as for support

staff development programs. I have been involved this year with a training project for secretarial staff from all over campus. In a three hour workshop format, I was able to work with 26 secretaries on improving their oral communication skills. In addition to building goodwill for the department, it was helpful to me to network with these prime information movers. A second workshop is planned for January with a new group of attenders due to the feedback from the first group who found some basic training in speaking -- especially anxiety reduction, to be useful in their jobs. If you can get this group on your side, the world is yours, my friend!

Another on campus application is the campus speech tournament for students in your basic public speaking and/or oral interpretation courses. In this activity, each section of public speaking selects one or two representatives doing a speech to inform and speech to persuade. These representatives then meet in a series of elimination rounds until a group of six or so finalists are identified. A final round, open to the public with attendant publicity and invited guests, etc., is then held, with winners getting appropriate recognition. The entire event is run by forensics students after the initial class selection. Many faculty give extra-credit for their representatives. This idea is found on many campuses, and is a way for these students to learn through addition practice and presentation of their otherwise "one-shot" speeches, for the forensics students to learn tournament

organization and judging, and for the rest of the campus to learn what good application of speaking training can produce.

A final aspect of learning by doing at Cal Poly concerns our Senior Project. Another unique aspect of the this campus is that every student must complete a culminating activity of some sort related to the major. Often, this project consists of an activity of some sort and a report of the results of that activity. While in Speech Communication, this project has often been an extended rhetorical criticism, or a small field study, it also has been used extensively for the application and completion of an applied project. While the credit is on campus, the activity is often off campus, so senior project, a three unit individual study course, will serve as the bridge in this paper from campus to community applications.

Off Campus Applications

The students in senior project take ideas past a faculty review process and then execute the project during one of their final quarters. Some of the examples which show how they learn by doing include working as an assistant with a local high school forensics program. The student would typically spend three hours a week at the high school listening to speakers, timing speeches, advising students on the development of ideas into speeches, or working with debaters. At the end of the term they would write up the experience in the form, perhaps, of a workbook for tutoring forensics competitors. The written report must be well beyond a

log or summary. It needs to be analytical in nature, synthetic in approach, and of value to a reader in subsequent quarters.

An extension of this type of application can be seen with a student I am working with this quarter. She is involved in the Academic Decathlon program, coaching students from a small local high school on interview and speaking skills. Large numbers of Cal Poly students regularly serve as judges for our county-wide competition - often 20 or more have spent the day in this capacity for the past 8 or 9 years. One good way to become well known and appreciated in your community is to have your students judge at these events, and at high school speech and debate tournaments. It is most important that these student judges receive sufficient training before they are sent out. Care must be taken to instruct them in the responsibilities, the procedures and the decorum expected as they represent your campus and your department. For example, prior to our large high school speech and debate tournament, each student judge must undergo one hour of training, including how to fill out a ballot, sample ballots to critique, rules for the contest, dress, deportment, timeliness and terminology. Since we have begun using large numbers of trained, but otherwise unrelated to forensics, judges, the popularity of the Cal Poly tournament has grown from 12 schools and 120 competitors, to 64 schools and well over 1,000 contestants. It is not usual for this tournament to host over 200 debate entries, most of which are judged by students who have not seen nor participated in a contest

debate. We get letters from participating high schools each year telling us how fine they felt the judging went.

Other off campus projects have included doing personnel audits for local businesses, working on public relations for area restaurants, developing a communications training manual for a local radio station and another for a delivery service. We have high school speech communication activities workbooks, and one recently put together to assist language arts instruction in elementary schools.

Other speakers on today's panel may touch on using members of the forensics activity to demonstrate the "doing" of part of our field. Suffice it to say that for years I have had members of the debate team (carefully selected to be sure) present a Lincoln-Douglas debate at local service and civic clubs. They get invited back year after year, so the students learn by doing a debate for a general audience, and the community learns about us by listening to our students. Individual events speakers are popular guests at literature classrooms, and our students from Oral Interpretation of Children's Literature classes are required to go out to local elementary schools and libraries and present their selections to real audiences. By doing the activity in front of community audiences, they learn about the presentation variables which operate beyond the classroom. At a recent community festival, our students participated in the discussion of oil drilling off the coast issue by presenting several stories from the Chumash Native American tradition.

Summary

While certainly not representing the research or scholarly aspects of the discipline, these learn by doing activities nevertheless present an opportunity for students and faculty in our departments to reach out beyond the college classroom and apply what they have learned in some of our classes to the campus larger community.