

Oral Communication: It's All in the Presentation

First-year student Peter Hudson '08 began his day with a good cardiovascular workout—he spent the snowy December morning “surfing with the seals at Popham Beach.”

“It was awesome,” he says, dropping into a seat that afternoon in Associate Professor of History Sarah McMahan’s first-year seminar class, *Utopia: Intentional Communities in America, 1630-1997*. “The seals came up really close and looked at us.”

Just moments later, Hudson’s heart is beating fast for another reason: fourteen of his classmates are looking at him while he gives a 10-minute oral presentation on his research about two communes from the late 1960s. It’s a subject he has researched for the past month and about which he will soon have to write an essay—an important research and writing assignment for the class.

His talk varies from a slightly jittery reading of organized notes to a detailed, colloquial description of daily life in the communes. His eyes meet his audi-

ence. His hands only occasionally jam into his pockets. He seems to know his subject, and if he can ride the wave of nerves successfully, he



Peter Hudson, '08, presents his research to the class.

will make it smoothly to the question-and-answer period at the end of his talk. More important, says his professor, “he’ll be well on his way to having the communication and organizational skills to prepare him for the rest of college.”

Hudson is participating in one of six first-year seminars that are part of Bowdoin’s new Oral Communication Presentation Skills Project. It is designed to increase students’ public speaking skills, help them build persuasive verbal arguments, and increase poise—or at least comfort—in speaking up in groups.

As did many colleges and universities, Bowdoin used to include a course in Oral Communication as part of its required curriculum. That course—as well as others such as hygiene and physical education—was eliminated when colleges be-

gan loosening requirements in the 1960s. Now many colleges are acknowledging the importance of public speaking to the academic success of their students.

Oral communication also may be among the most important portable skills graduates can have. According to a 1998 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, good communication is the top personal quality sought by employers. Verbal communication skills were rated more highly even than written or computer skills.

While many colleges and universities have begun designating some classes as “speaking intensive,” Bowdoin’s approach is to embed public speaking into the first-year seminar curriculum, where students can develop these important skills from the get-go.

Public speaking is a critical complement to written communication, says McMahon, and often gives new college students the confidence to share their ideas informally as well as formally. “It’s amazing how many times people with something really important to say don’t say it, because they don’t know how,” she says. “I never had any instruction in public speaking; I just learned by watching others model it. Presenting is something we expect students to do, but we don’t teach them how to do it.”

McMahon’s students must give two short oral presentations during the semester. Today’s presentation is their second. It is designed to help them focus their thinking about their research before they write, gain more experience in public speaking, and get feedback from their classmates.

While McMahon advises them on their research proposals and progress—and grades the students’ presentations—the bulk of their one-on-one presentation instruction has come from a fellow student, Christie Gannon, ’06. She is one of seven Bowdoin student speaking-facilitators trained to lead oral-presentation prep sessions with students.

“I thought it would be great to do,” says Gannon, “because public speaking is something I like to do. If I’m presenting my own research, it gives me a rush—it’s a way of showing the hard work you’ve done. By speaking, rather than reading, it becomes a personal statement. It’s a great way to actually show who you are as a person along with your work.”

Gannon met with small groups of McMahon’s students over four presentation-prep sessions, teaching them physical presentation skills (“Make eye contact. Don’t put your hands in your pockets. Take your time.”). She also helped each student with organizing the content of his or her presentation, offering various organizational strategies to bring the thesis to life.

“The biggest thing is getting your main point, your central argument, out front,” she says. “Some people like to do creative openings as well. But you shouldn’t make your audience work to know what you’re talking about. It needs to be placed right out there.”

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Gannon received her oral-communication training from Bowdoin alumnae Kerry McDonald '99, a Cambridge, Mass.-based communications and leadership consultant. McDonald has been working with Bowdoin faculty and students for two years to bring this project fully to life.

"The College does a terrific job of developing students' writing skills," says McDonald, "but many colleges now realize it's just as important that students learn how to speak persuasively to an audience about their ideas."

McDonald began with professors. In 2003, she led a faculty seminar on incorporating oral communication assignments into a syllabus. In the spring of 2004, Linda Docherty, associate professor of art history, piloted the first speaking-intensive seminar course. The next semester, McDonald began offering non-credit public speaking workshops to students in the evenings and eventually recruited seven students to become student-speaking facilitators.

By 2004, McDonald had recruited six professors willing to revise their seminar curricula to include oral presentations, devoting one-quarter of their class grades to the new format. Other professors

currently participating in the Oral Communication Presentation Skills Project include: De-Nin Lee, *Stories and Scrolls*; Susan Tananbaum, *Players and Spectators: History, Culture, and Sports*; Ray Miller, *the Culture of Nationalism*; Allen Wells, *the Cuban Revolution*; Roy Partridge, *Racism*.



Hudson enjoys question-and-answer time with his fellow students, as Gannon, right, looks on approvingly.

McMahon says the extra work has paid off beyond her expectations. "I have been listening to reports for years and have never heard anything like these," she says. "As a consequence of their work in the presentation-prep sessions, they are farther along on these papers than students in this class have ever been before."

Even extreme surfer Peter Hudson has to admit the adrenalin-rush of public speaking "was pretty intense."

"This time my mind didn't freeze up," he says. "This is the first time I've had any training in speaking in my life. It helps a lot. And I know much more about where my research is going."

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