

Redesigning the Model Lesson Assignment in COMS 930: Teaching Beginning Oral Communication

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BACKGROUND

The course that I targeted for my project in the Best Practices Institute was COMS 930: Teaching Beginning Oral Communication. This two-credit graduate seminar is required for all new GTAs (around eight to 12 each fall) in the Communication Studies Department as preparation for teaching COMS 130, Speaker-Audience Communication (a class that fulfills the "Argument and Reason" general education requirement). The GTAs take the pedagogy course in their first semester along with three other classes, which is a heavy load in our department. The students are diverse with respect to their preparation to teach basic public speaking. Some have taught before; some have not. Most have taken public speaking; a few haven't. Some are MA students; some are working on PhDs. Our graduate students represent an array of specializations, from rhetoric and political communication to organizational, interpersonal, and legal communication. Understandably, some of our GTAs are more interested in teaching public speaking than others. Although we offer education-oriented classes in the spring (e.g., "Rhetoric, Teaching, and Student Development," "History of Rhetoric Education"), those seminars tend to be quite small. For most of our students, the fall pedagogy seminar will be the one time during graduate school when they focus intensely on their teaching, which is why I would like to maximize the potential of the course.

For the Best Practices Institute, I focused on improving one major element of the course, the model lesson assignment. Each GTA in the pedagogy seminar is required to design and present a 50-minute model lesson to their colleagues before the lesson is covered in COMS 130. The model lesson assignment has been used for years in the pedagogy seminar and is generally a sound strategy for preparing GTAs to teach the basic course, especially in light of the text-centric pedagogy that has dominated public speaking classes for decades. In the typical model lesson, the GTA covers the assigned chapter material in lecture-discussion format, then introduces an activity that highlights one or more of the concepts from the chapter. This approach is common in our field, but I have begun to wonder about whether this is the most effective way to use class time to teach public speaking.

Although the existing model lesson assignment was generally useful, I identified several problems with it. First, the assignment, which required a lecture outline based on the chapter materials, produced redundant material. GTAs in previous years have already produced these outlines, and they are available in the instructor's manual, as well. There may be a value in requiring new teachers to go through the process of outlining a lecture, but their time could be spent in more profitable ways. Second, I noticed that GTAs at times had trouble differentiating between critical and tangential knowledge, perhaps due to the requirement that they provide a lecture outline. Their lecture notes often included absolutely everything in the chapter, and consequently, there was sometimes undue emphasis on certain topics and not enough on others. Third, the existing lesson plan assignment did not explicitly encourage GTAs to incorporate

analysis of models and imitation, strategies that have been fundamental to rhetoric education since ancient times. These elements are implicit in our textbook materials (e.g., in the speeches for analysis in the appendix), but the existing model lesson assignment did not draw attention to these strategies. The strategies are too important to be left to chance. They need to be incorporated as part of an intentional design process.

In summary, my primary goals for this project were to revise the model lesson assignment to eliminate unnecessary work, incorporate more intentionality in the design process, and better reflect time-tested wisdom about rhetoric pedagogy. My chosen method was to use Wiggins and McTighe's concept of backward design as a framework for the revision project. I was introduced to backward design on the first day of the Best Practices Institute, and the approach seemed to be perfectly suited to addressing the problems with the existing assignment.

IMPLEMENTATION

The principles of backward design provided a useful framework for designing and implementing the model lesson revision project. My goals, as noted above, were to equip GTAs with an efficient, intentional, discipline-specific process for creating effective lessons on public speaking. After refining my goals for the project at the Best Practices Institute, I next determined how I would assess student learning in these areas. I decided that a two-part assignment would allow me to assess learning most fully. The first part of the assignment, a three to four page design analysis, called for reflection on the design process itself; GTAs were to identify their choices with respect to stages of the design process (e.g., desired results, acceptable evidence, instruction) as well as curricular priorities (e.g., enduring vs. not-so-critical knowledge), providing justification for their choices. The second part of the assignment was the lesson plan itself. In the past, these lessons often exceeded 10 typed pages; with the new assignment, lessons were to be four pages or so. I then created a rubric based on the criteria for evaluation specified in the assignment sheet, making sure to reflect the emphasis on intentionality of design and discipline-specific pedagogy. (See the assignment sheets and rubric for more details.)

I devoted three instructional sessions to preparing GTAs for the model lessons. The first two occurred during summer orientation. At the beginning of orientation week, GTAs were assigned chapter 1 of Wiggins and McTighe's *Understanding by Design*, which describes the backward design process. We discussed the article during the middle of the week, at which time I emphasized three principles: teachers as designers, the three stages of the design process, and the process for establishing curricular priorities. Students had an opportunity to begin working with these principles during a microteaching session that followed later in the week. At that time, each GTA presented a 10-minute mini-lesson and received feedback from their peers in the form of brief letters ("Dear X, I thought you did Y particularly well. In the future, you might consider working on Z.") The third session devoted to lesson planning occurred on the first day of the teaching seminar. In that class, we discussed the details of the lesson plan assignment and expectations for performance, which gave me an opportunity to reiterate the principles of backward design that we had discussed during orientation. I handed out a model lesson plan to give students an idea of what I was expecting, and I also drew attention to a document called Kansas Core Outcomes, which identifies desired outcomes for speech courses in Kansas. Finally,

we discussed two readings on imitation as a pedagogical strategy in rhetoric education. In this discussion (as on the assignment sheet), I emphasized the importance of imitation (specifically the analysis of model speeches) and encouraged GTAs to incorporate that strategy into their lessons.

GTAs began presenting model lessons in the second week of the teaching seminar. The lessons were scheduled to be presented roughly one week prior to the date when the subject would be covered in COMS 130. To facilitate feedback on the lessons, GTAs were asked to post their lesson plans and design analysis assignments to Blackboard the night before our seminar met. All GTAs were to have reviewed the materials before class, with two students assigned to be formal respondents in class. During our meetings, we would observe one or two model lesson presentations, depending on what was coming up the following week in COMS 130. GTAs presented the lesson as if we were COMS 130 students, and we would then take 10-15 minutes to discuss what worked well and what could be improved.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Students performed well overall on this assignment, with five earning As and four earning Bs (a typical breakdown for this assignment). The “A” performances consistently met the criteria outlined in the assignment sheet and the rubric. The design analyses at this level were thorough and perceptive, and the resulting lessons showed a great deal of coherence and intentionality. The first lesson presented in the fall 2009 seminar, on informative speaking (an example of “A” work included with this material), illustrates these qualities well. In the design analysis, the student referred to principles of backward design and used the course textbook and Kansas Core Outcomes document to establish objectives for the lesson. She then identified acceptable evidence for each of the four desired outcomes of the lesson. Next, she described instructional activities, including a rationale for her choices and linking the activities directly to the acceptable evidence and objectives, which contributed to a highly coherent plan. The student did not address modeling explicitly, but her proposed activity of brainstorming and narrowing topics first as a large group, then in small groups, provided a useful process model for students to follow individually. The careful design analysis, not surprisingly, produced a similarly impressive lesson.

The “B” work was characterized by one or more of the following factors: less careful design analysis, which made the resulting lesson seem less coherent and purposeful, less attention to discriminating between important and not so important information, and too much time devoted to lecturing. In some cases, inaccuracy of information (or a questionable choice of examples or supporting material) was also an issue. Time (or lack thereof) may have been a contributing factor. The lessons featured good ideas, but with more reflection, those ideas could have been presented more powerfully. The lesson on audience analysis (an example of “B” work included here) illustrates some of these issues. The difference between this example and the “A” example is immediately noticeable, just from the format of the lesson. Whereas the “A” lesson includes objectives, an agenda, and an easy-to-follow outline with ideas coordinated and subordinated, the “B” lesson is more of a manuscript and lacks a clear roadmap. Key ideas are highlighted, but the relationship between them is harder to discern than in the “A” example. The GTA had the

right idea with the application activity he mentioned in his design analysis, but the lesson plan includes only lecture notes. When the presentation was actually given, most of the time was devoted to PowerPoint lecture notes. With more time and reflection, the instructor could have retooled his plan to increase coherence, reduce lecture time, and leave more time for application.

REFLECTIONS

I am pleased with the revisions of the lesson plan assignment. By incorporating backward design principles, the lessons have become more sharply focused and intentional, and GTAs will leave the pedagogy seminar with a simple, useful framework for designing future assignments and courses. Although the assignment is moving in the right direction, there are a number of changes I intend to make, based on my observations of student performance.

1) I will provide students with an example of a design analysis. Before implementing this new assignment, I gave students an example of a lesson plan, but I had no examples of design analyses. The example of the “A” analysis included here would be a good one to use. One item missing from that example is explicit attention to figure 2 of the Wiggins and McTighe chapter on backward design, which addresses curricular priorities (“enduring” vs. “good to be familiar with” knowledge). Curiously, almost none of the students addressed figure 2 in their analyses, despite the fact that it was explicitly mentioned in the criteria for evaluation. I will either need to add that section to the design analysis example, or consider eliminating it from the evaluative criteria.

2) One student suggested that the design analysis should be due a week before the lesson plan. This makes sense, especially if I can return the design analyses to the GTAs with enough time for them to modify their lessons.

3) I would like to formalize the peer review process, which I handled a bit haphazardly this fall. Peers reviewers simply took the lead in discussing the lessons, but next year, I would like them to prepare a written critique (and if the design analyses are due earlier, that would help the peer reviewers). This will enhance the discussion in class and give GTAs additional opportunities to reinforce what they are learning about lesson design.

4) I intend to spend more time on modeling and imitation pedagogy and will consider requiring that those strategies be incorporated into the lessons. This is the most important change I would like to make. If COMS 130 students are going to become effective speakers, they need to see (or hear, or read) speeches—the more the better. Few, if any, of the GTAs utilized this strategy. There are several possible explanations. First, as noted earlier, existing teaching models are largely of the “lecture + activity” variety. Second, our technology in Bailey Hall, where the pedagogy seminar meets, is unreliable and therefore might have dissuaded GTAs from using it for their lesson presentations. Third, we lack a good source of sample speeches. We have a few (outdated) tapes of student speeches in the Basic Course Office, and YouTube can be helpful, but a large collection of KU speeches would be ideal. To this end, I am using my funds from the Best Practices Institute for the creation of a resource with model speeches from KU students. We

will be able to use this resource to improve teaching and learning in GTA orientation, the teaching seminar, and COMS 130 classes.