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## **CHANGE THE PLACEMENT, THE PACE, AND THE PREPARATION FOR THE ORAL PRESENTATION**

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THE ORAL PRESENTATION in my classroom had evolved into the last assignment before the final exam. After many of the team presentations appeared to be poorly designed and inadequately prepared, I changed my process for the oral presentation, which involved looking at its placement in the course, the pace, and the preparation.

### **Placement—Earlier in the Semester**

By moving the team oral presentation earlier in the course, I hoped to solve two problems. One problem was the increased stress both students and I experienced when the oral presentation was held at the end of the semester. Student stress involved unreliable teammates (toleration levels were low after rocky written reports), end-of-semester stress where work piled up, and the stress of speaking in front of the class. My stressors included student stress, technological stress, and time stress. I hoped that all the students showed up for the team presentations and that all the equipment and PowerPoint presentations worked because we did not have any extra time in the course to allow for difficulties.

For the oral presentation, students are required to use PowerPoint following traditional guidelines about the content and appearance of the slides. The oral presentation is not related to the written report but is an opportunity for students to do additional research on a business topic. This semester, teams of four students were responsible for both a team presentation and a team report on different topics.

### **Pace—Smaller Tasks Over Longer Period of Time**

In previous semesters, I simply listed the requirements of 15 slides, eight research articles on the topic, and a team presentation time of 10 to 12 minutes. Frequently, the sophomore students appeared overwhelmed with the assignment. I decided to slow down the pace by taking a few minutes each week to set smaller, achievable goals over a period of time.

*Individual presentation.* First, I assigned each student an individual PowerPoint presentation of at least eight slides. The content was relatively structured, including a title slide and bullet slides about the student's interests, such as favorite movies or books, hobbies, vacation destinations, and so on. Lack of software knowledge can be a concern in such an assignment. In a basic business communication course, students do not have time to learn everything about PowerPoint. However, an instructor can provide key points in a 10-minute demonstration.

Students had a week to go to one of the campus labs and design their own presentations. They were to bring back a presentation with the slides printed in a handout format of their choice. This exercise ensured that all team members had at least a beginning knowledge of PowerPoint.

*Choosing a topic.* Next, each team selected a topic of general business interest from a list of topics for their business oral presentation. This semester's topics included insider trading, ethics of business, status of the automobile, dressing for work, status of the euro, business etiquette, and security trends in the workplace. Other current and relevant topics could also be developed.

*Researching the topic.* By including research earlier in the semester, I had a chance to explain procedures and techniques for research sooner. Once the topic was decided, each team member brought at least two research articles on the topic to class.

*Planning a storyboard.* Students were asked to put their ideas about the topic in a coherent format using storyboards to note visuals and key concepts. The storyboard used a comic strip format that allowed students to lay out the required number of slides they would use for the PowerPoint presentation. Students sketched the content of each slide including the layout; key words or thoughts; and any graphics, visuals, or sounds.

They brought their completed storyboards to class about a week later, and teams compared their storyboards with those prepared by other teams. Did they have an opening overview? Were key points successfully developed? Was there a conclusion? Was the presentation interesting or formulaic? After the instructor reviewed the storyboards and offered suggestions, students were encouraged to prepare their actual PowerPoint presentations.

### **Preparation—Practice Is Key**

Students were required to e-mail the instructor the completed PowerPoint presentation as an attachment several days before the presentation.

*Practicing the presentation.* Because the PowerPoint slides were finished several days before the presentation, students then had time to actually practice their presentations. In previous semesters, it seemed that some teams had so much trouble finishing the PowerPoint slides that they did not have time to practice.

*Anticipating questions.* As part of the presentation, students were expected to answer questions from the audience. If there were no questions, the instructor posed questions. Deciding how to handle questions in a team format can certainly show the depth of preparation on the topic.

### **Conclusions**

Students appeared to be more confident about developing the presentation once they had a storyboard to build their PowerPoint assignments. By using this approach, I felt that the presentation was more of a team effort. At other times, I had wondered if the student who had the most knowledge of PowerPoint designed the whole presentation with little assistance from other team members.

This method also appeared to provide a more relaxed approach to the presentation. With a few minutes of class each week over several

weeks to prepare for the presentation, students had a more gradual introduction to the presentation. And it was early in the semester when they had more time to devote to teamwork instead of late in the semester when both students and faculty have frayed nerves and time challenges.

By conducting research early in the semester for the oral presentation, students were ready to use their research techniques in more depth when preparing for a written report on a different topic.

Perhaps you might wish to revisit the structure of your oral presentation and decide if it is the best opportunity for your students or if changes would enhance your results.

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## **BREAKING BAD HABITS: TEACHING EFFECTIVE POWERPOINT USE TO WORKING GRADUATE STUDENTS**

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ONE INTERESTING aspect of teaching students to use PowerPoint and similar graphics packages effectively is that graduate students who are already in the workforce often have bad presentation habits that they need to break. In my experience teaching regulatory affairs and biotech professionals, Navy officers near the end of their active duty careers, and assorted engineers and county and city administrators, their bad habits include the usual suspects:

- Too many words on a slide, often almost a script
- Backgrounds that are too busy or inappropriate
- Too much animation, sound, and other bells and whistles
- Too many slides for actual speaker time (Why not just use a handout?)
- Overcomplicated graphics, especially military ones
- Lack of presentation structure

I will discuss ways of breaking these bad habits, but a larger problem in many classroom presentations is the lack of a point or reason for presenting; too many people just present a mass of information. We use

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