

# FAVORITE ASSIGNMENTS: SELECTIONS FROM THE ABC CONFERENCE, SAN ANTONIO, OCTOBER 2006

**Editor's Note:** For the October 2006 ABC conference in San Antonio, the ABC Teaching Committee convened a session, "My Favorite Assignment," in which participants shared details about ideas that they have used successfully in their business communication courses. Following the conference, Marie Flatley undertook the task of compiling written versions from several of the participants; their contributions are presented here.

## TEACHING THE VIRTUAL PRESENTATION

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TODAY THE VIRTUAL presentation is catching on rapidly in small, medium, and large businesses alike. One company, Citrix Online, the parent of GoToMeeting and other Web-based services for online collaborating, reported a revenue increase of more than 50% in 2006. Their Web-based users include more than 180,000 organizations worldwide, including nearly 100% of Fortune 100 and Fortune Global 500 companies (Citrix, 2007). Other companies in this sector are growing rapidly, too, revealing that the use of virtual presentations in business is growing and the need for employees with skills for delivering them is likely also growing.

A virtual presentation is one delivered live from a desktop or laptop computer to an audience anywhere in the world where there is Internet access. A major change from the face-to-face presentation is that the virtual presenter does not usually see the audience, and often the audience does not see the presenter. Although some early video-conferencing and distance learning used telecommunications technology where presenters could see the audiences at remote sites, and audiences could see the presenter, today's most widely used technologies for delivering virtual presentations are Web-based technologies that currently either don't use video or use it in very limited ways.

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These new Web-based technologies are easy to use and inexpensive, making them readily accessible for both small- and medium-sized enterprises as well as large corporations. And they've been adopted by businesses to communicate not only across the country or around the world, but also to neighboring cities or even down the street.

Several factors seem to be driving this adoption. Positive factors include more widespread use of high-speed broadband, cost drops on the hardware and Web services technology, and convenience and time-saving benefits. Some negative factors influencing its adoption include resistance to travel after 9/11 with its security hassles and increased costs of transportation, housing, and time for face-to-face presentations.

Preparing students for today's and tomorrow's workplace clearly means teaching them how to prepare and deliver the virtual presentation.

## **Background**

The good news is that the topic of virtual presentations can easily be integrated into the oral presentation instruction you are currently giving. My experience with it has been in an upper division reporting class where students have always given three oral presentations—two individual presentations and one team presentation. They now deliver the team presentation using virtual tools, based on a short reading (Lesikar, Flatley, & Rentz, 2008) and on a long team-prepared report. Most of the time they have delivered from my office to the classroom. When they have real clients, their clients join from their own workplace computers. These business people have been very receptive to using the technology even if they have never used it before because it saves them time getting to campus and the struggle of parking on campus. In the 3 years our students have been delivering virtual presentations, the business people have been much more engaged in the Q & A sessions than they had been when sitting in the classroom.

## **Tools**

Several companies compete for this business, and their products are similar in many respects (see the appendix for some examples). You

can see in Figure 1 an example of Microsoft's Live Meeting tool. In this view, participants have ready access to a couple of tools: chat for asking questions and Feedback to Presenter for signaling the presenter to proceed, slow down, or stop. They can see the slide as well as a list of who is attending. In this screen shot the presenter has included his static picture, too. Also, the viewer can switch to a full-screen view of the presentation at any time.

We have used Citrix's GoToMeeting and Wimba's Live Classroom. Cisco's WebEx and Microsoft's Live Meeting/Groove technology are big players in this marketplace, too. Overall, GoToMeeting was probably the easiest to use; less than 15 minutes of class time was spent demonstrating the tool, and students picked it up quickly on their own. One aspect involved in using this tool was dialing a long-distance number for the audio. Although it worked perfectly, my campus makes this difficult because classroom phones are set up for campus use only.

In recent years we've switched to Wimba's Live Classroom, which the campus has licensed for use with Blackboard. One class period is spent introducing the tool. Students pick it up quickly, but we are still trying to improve on the Internet audio. Wimba's Live Classroom allows users to record their presentations for later viewing, which is terrific feedback. (However, campus privacy experts have advised me to get students to sign releases for its viewing both by other students and for other uses.) It also has a chat tool where viewers can chat with other viewers as well as the speaker. I found some students chatted extensively off the presenters' subject, so we now do not enable the tool for all students.

## **Student Responses**

Two noteworthy payoffs occurred for the GoToMeeting students within 6 months of completing the class. One student who was hired by a local company was asked to help roll out the tool in the company. Apparently, he won rave reviews internally for setting it up quickly and flawlessly. Another student reported he was asked to participate in a virtual meeting and could do so competently. Current



Figure 1. Screenshot From Microsoft Live Meeting

students report getting favorable responses from campus recruiters when they list it as a skill on their résumés.

## Conclusion

Preparing all students to know how to deliver virtual presentations gives them confidence that if they run into these assignments on the job, they will be able to participate competently and effectively. Not only is it easy and inexpensive, but also it can be easily integrated into current class designs.

Additionally, for those teaching online courses, Web-based presentations are an excellent method for incorporating oral presentations into the business communication course. And because these presentations can be delivered anytime and anywhere, students might present to students in other countries as part of their coursework on cross-cultural communication.

## Appendix

### Web-Based Presentation Tools and Their URLs

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Adobe Acrobat Connect Professional (formerly Macromedia Breeze)	<a href="http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/">http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/</a>
Cisco WebEx	<a href="http://www.webex.com/solutions/web-meetings.html">http://www.webex.com/solutions/web-meetings.html</a>
Citrix GoToMeeting	<a href="https://www.gotomeeting.com">https://www.gotomeeting.com</a>
Wimba Live Classroom	<a href="http://www.wimba.com/products/liveclassroom">http://www.wimba.com/products/liveclassroom</a>
Microsoft Live Meeting	<a href="http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/livemeeting/">http://office.microsoft.com/en-us/livemeeting/</a>

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NOTE: Last compiled July 2, 2007. Please feel free to suggest the names of other appropriate tools to me at [marie.flatley@sdsu.edu](mailto:marie.flatley@sdsu.edu).

## References

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## TONE AND STYLE: DEVELOPING A NEGLECTED SEGMENT OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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THE IMPORTANCE OF tone and style to communication is attested by the longevity of the popularity of *Elements of Style*, published originally in 1918, with the fourth edition published in 2000 (Strunk, 1918; Strunk & White, 2000). Communicators in business and academia at all levels need to send messages that are understood pleasantly and effortlessly. Many business communication textbooks deal briefly with tone and style—for example, in discussions of the *you*-attitude and positive language—but don't provide extensive explanation and drill.

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