

Collaboration Among Colleagues

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Abstract

The authors describe a two-college collaborative project designed to enhance student learning in public speaking.

In higher education, faculty are often encouraged to collaborate with their colleagues, to – as the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines it – “work together in a joint intellectual effort.” We often think of such projects as occurring within a department or on a particular campus, but we have discovered that even faculty in similar disciplines from different colleges can collaborate effectively, bringing their own particular strengths to that venture.

Distance and Adventure

Rappahannock and Germanna Community Colleges have combined forces in the area of public speaking instruction, with two goals in mind: to enhance first-time delivery in a distance learning environment and to co-develop content modules, which could be used in any speech communication course.

To make our partnership effective, we began by considering the individual strengths of the two instructors, Bill Fiege of Germanna and Karen Newtzie of Rappahannock:

Fiege's Strengths	Newtzie's Strengths
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Desire to learn from experienced professor. ● Experience developing “mini-lectures” to cover speech content. ● Development of unique ideas to benefit the hybrid course format. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Experience with hybrid speech course. ● Organization of course content to meet needs and expectations of distance education students. ● Willingness to assist “rookie” online instructor

Also, from the onset, we knew that a venture of this nature must include technology support and vision. We also recognized that we needed to create a work group with high energy in order to develop a quality product in a limited amount of time.

So we followed the advice of Pregent (1994), who identifies the characteristics of an effective work group as

- identifying and valuing the pursuit of a common goal,
- creating and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relations,
- overcoming obstacles that hinder productive activities, and
- becoming involved on all levels.

Thus, we knew our team needed to include both faculty members (Newtzie and Fiege) and both directors of distance education (Smith and Blankenship).

Technology Development

When a distance-education public speaking course was first deployed at RCC in 1998, we had licensed videos from Northern Virginia Community College to supplement instruction. As technology progressed, we began looking into ways to update the video component of the course, investigating a variety of technologies to support the project.

Previously at RCC, another instructor had recorded live classes using video streaming technology. For this project, however, we realized that we needed to find the lowest common denominator in technology access of student homes. Because not all student computers are the same and because the RCC service region contains mostly students on dial-up modems, the team decided to use a similar technology but burn CDs instead.

Our collaborative team next assessed the feasibility of the project by examining equipment compatibility between the two colleges, instructional accessibility, and technical support. In a few short months, module design and implementation occurred (See Figure 1). The modules were produced and distributed to students the following semester.



The image shows a slide titled "Unit 1" with a table of contents. The slide has a light green background and rounded corners. At the bottom right, there is a button labeled "Return to first slide".

Unit 1		
✓ To Share the Truth	Video	Handout
✓ Fear of Public Speaking	Video	Handout
✓ Listening	Video	Handout
✓ Supporting Your Ideas	Video	Handout
✓ Visual Aid/Demonstration Speech	Video	Handout
✓ Sample Demonstration Speech	Video	

Figure 1 - Unit 1 Module Table of Contents

Course Design and Instructional Effectiveness

Our project improved instructional effectiveness by fostering peer mentoring and collaboration between our colleges. King (1997) underscores the importance of cooperation in teaching and learning, stating learning is enhanced when it is more of a team effort than a solo race. More ideas are generated and more experience is brought to instruction as two or more people are enriching the course content – thereby optimizing student learning.

In early course development, we instructors worked closely in creating similar syllabi, adopting the same textbook, and designing similar course assignments and learning sequences. In addition, we felt it was important for students at both colleges to have the ability to interact through a combined Blackboard speech pavilion. We therefore created monthly discussion board to engage students in these cross-college conversations on major learning points covered in the course.

As a new distance-learning instructor, Fiege found that a primary challenge was to find ways to give students feedback that was well received and understood. Working together, he and Newtzie developed alternate avenues of communication and feedback, which enabled equivalent student growth in speechmaking compared to that in more traditional deliveries.

An additional challenge a new faculty member might have in distance learning is observing the need for a high level of self-motivation in students. By using multiple structures such as discussion board forums, video lesson modules, and monthly face-to-face sessions, Newtzie and Fiege developed a strong set of motivational factors for student success.

Trying It Out

The new collaborative speech course was initially offered spring semester 2004 at both community colleges.

Both classes filled in the first semester. The students ranged in age from 18 to 65, and were both full- and part-time community college students. The majority of students in these courses stated that they needed this hybrid course format because of their employment schedules.

Between the two colleges, 45 students successfully completed the course during the spring 2004 semester; another 50 students successfully completed these courses during the summer term. As Hanson and Teven suggest in their research (2004), results for on-line public speaking are comparable to those of in-class sections of the course.

To assess the effectiveness of the project, the instructors solicited student comments in several areas of the course design. Some of their remarks are excerpted here, following the prompts given to the students:

The distance learning delivery of SPD 100:

"The distance learning delivery of SPD 100 keeps the students in constant contact through the written assignments required for Blackboard. On some topics, the answers can be varied and that allows students to bring out their own perspectives, which helps enrich the topic as one may bring out a point that another had overlooked, or now sees in a new light by reading the post of their classmate."

"The Distance Learning Delivery of SPD 100 has been very helpful. It's as though we are in a classroom. It's just like being at the college. We have instant replies (usually very quickly and within 24 hours) from you. The set-up of the class and instructor(s) must be in sync for this type of learning to work. Without the proper set-up and teacher, this would not be beneficial. It is very thorough and well thought out for us (the students) to comprehend."

"The delivery of the distance speech class is excellent because it easily becomes routine. We have five meetings a semester, one being an introduction to the class and the others involve a speech in which we were assigned a month before. Because of this, organizationally, I know what I have to do for each class. In between each monthly meeting we have two to three discussion board postings in reference to the class we attended and the work in which we were supposed to read in order to finish our next assignment. Between the book and the class CD, all the information I need to know is provided."

The new CD video modules:

"The co-produced CD video modules are an important tool for me and below I will touch on some of the reasons: First, the two instructors never talk down to the students. The two instructors, who are on advanced levels on this subject, speak on the CD as if they are friends helping us to be better speakers. Their vocal tone and usage of words are animated and soothing. The way they have approached a topic, which scares the daylights out of most novice speechmakers, makes the whole assignment seem like something one can realistically accomplish. Secondly, after seeing Dr. Newtzie smiling on the CD, or Mr. Bill Fiege, and both having such pleasant tones, then I am not as terrified to speak in front of Dr. Newtzie during a speech. All of the various ways the CD is composed helps take the edge off while teaching me the many facets of speechmaking. Thirdly, the pointers and conveyed knowledge on the speech subjects are easy to follow with handy PowerPoint handouts; I can click on any of them to quickly review part of a module. The viewing of this CD before a speech makes me feel like I just had a great pep talk from a friendly coach and now am ready to 'go make a speech.'"

"The CD video modules are great. I can stop, pause, rewind, and fast forward for my note taking. I can go back and review parts that I may have trouble understanding or for a speech. You cannot do that in a classroom. I also enjoy the CD video lesson because you and Bill translate important points from the book and put them in language that anyone can understand. You answer questions that I have in my head on the CD. The CD just enhances our learning experience in this class."

"I don't know what educators call it but, I would consider your CD video modules 'Just in time training.' That is what we call training that is needed immediately and it happens at just the right time. Like your CDs, they are just in time to prepare us for our next speech. The modules are very well done, I especially like the voice with the PowerPoint slides that accompany them."

"The topics on the CD work very well for me because they help me to focus on the information that I need to help with

my next speech. In fact, I will be doing several training presentations at work and the tools that you have taught me to use are making my job go a lot faster and I feel that my presentations will provide information that the audience will be able to carry away with them and use. For me you have done an excellent job and I appreciate all your hard work.”

The Blackboard (Bb) speech pavilion:

“It is good to know that most of us experience the same feelings about speechmaking and try to overcome similar problems.”

“The Bb Speech Pavilion is also beneficial to our class in that we can share ideas, information, and get help from students at another college. The fact that we get to have two instructors not only helps us as students, but helps the instructors too. We can all share ideas, hints, and stumbling blocks to learn from each other as well as the text. Another thing that we benefit from by having two instructors/classes is that with all of us together, sharing our ideas, etc, everyone is sure to get help finding an idea or solution by us working together. It's just a win-win situation.”

“The Bb speech pavilion is very interesting because it allows class discussion through technological advances, diminishing stress, allowing the classes to participate in monthly discussion harmoniously.”

The combined compressed video sessions:

“Oh, it was fun when we got to see the other students on campus via real-time video technology and hear introductions. . . . Moreover, we knew we were all in the same boat and having our speech experiences at the same time, which was a great use of technology.”

“The video sessions are also great because we can actually see the people we ‘talk’ to on the computer. It helps to match the name with a face. It's just better communication, and that's what SPD 100 is about.”

“The combined compressed video sessions for face-to-face contact is interesting because it allows us to see and hear our teachers verbally and non-verbally. I also like the fact that it provides us with useful information, without making us ‘just’ read.”

Further Refinements

In reflection, our team was pleased with the outcome of this collaborative venture.

First, this project resulted in a high-quality first experience in distance education for Fiege at GCC. After his first semester as a distance learning speech instructor, Fiege noted, “I think overall the success rate for ‘surviving speech’ has been as strong, if not stronger, than the traditional speech course. The average age is older than the traditional course and the students as a whole are more focused and motivated on what they need to accomplish. They enjoy seeing the instructors on the CD as they can see us using the structure we expect from them in class. We ask for energy, enthusiasm, organization, etc., and they are able to witness that from us on the CD. It makes us as instructors more believable.”

Second, we are delighted with the portable modules we have produced for use in any speech communication course. Our next steps include additional video modules for the student CD, as well as further work on integration of Blackboard assignments with course objectives. We are well satisfied that this pilot venture is not only an excellent structure for a distance learning speech class, but is one that will work in any number of disciplines.

The rewards? Collaboration by faculty spawned collaboration by students in the combined Blackboard pavilion and compressed video sessions. The high level of energy in the work group translated into a successful new course delivery, which can be replicated throughout higher education.

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