

IMPROVING CLASSROOM PERFORMANCE

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Funded in part by a SoTL grant, this project was premised on the assumption that improved classroom instruction can lead to improved student learning. The project's two phases attempted to identify the most common presentation problems among UW-Platteville faculty, and to then propose specific steps to correct these problems.

The researcher acknowledged that most college instructors are ill-prepared to *be* classroom teachers, with virtually all graduate coursework focused on research and discipline-specific content. Very little time is devoted to instructional methodology and classroom practice.

Project Design

Given the lack of a universal construct for effective college teaching, the research was limited to three general presentation areas—effective design and use of visual support, nonverbal behaviors, and rhetorical style. Participants in the initial phase of the project were undergraduate students enrolled in sections of Public Speaking taught by the researcher. The course's routine content incorporated modules on visual support, nonverbal communication, and rhetorical style.

Student observers were asked to apply the concepts and principles of these modules in critiquing one of their other instructors. Liberal interpretations of federal guidelines *might* have precluded discussion with the local institutional review board, but the researcher agreed to secure faculty consent prior to observations; student observers, however, remained anonymous (to faculty "subjects").

Results & Discussion

Over a period of four semesters, 245 students participated in this project (as a course assignment), generating 2,449 comments. Roughly two-thirds of the comments were positive observations, and roughly one third of the comments were negative observations. A handful of neutral comments were also registered.

Content analysis identified 40 variables within the three general categories (visual support, nonverbal behaviors, rhetorical style). The relative balance between positive (two thirds) and negative (one third) comments might suggest that, in general, our faculty do a fairly effective job in the classroom. However, no master prescription exists for distinguishing effective instruction from ineffective instruction.

The four most common positive comments made reference to (1) effective body language, posture, and gestures; (2) effective volume, tone, and vocal projection; (3) appropriate eye contact and facial expression; and, (4) enthusiasm and a generally positive attitude. The five most common negative comments made reference to (1) overall visual effectiveness; (2) vocalized pauses, delivery rate, and accent; (3) ineffective body language, posture, and gestures; (4) ineffective volume, tone, and vocal projective; and, (5) appropriate eye contact and facial expression.

As noted, three elements (eye contact and facial expression; body language, posture, and gestures; and, volume, tone, and vocal projection) appeared frequently on both the positive and the negative lists. Despite the lack of a universal construct for effective classroom instruction, the results of this study might suggest that these common elements be perceived as an initial basis for distinguishing effective instructors from less-effective instructors.

Dissemination of Results

A written summary of the survey results was distributed to appropriate units on campus. The Teaching Excellence Center sponsored an in-service workshop in January 2007 (repeated in January 2008), providing practical tips for correcting presentation problems. Since distributed survey results did *not* identify faculty participants, the suggestions—although specific—were generic in tone. A few programmatic concerns were identified (e.g., the common problem with mathematics, engineering, and sciences of an instructor “talking to the board” while writing with his/her back to the students).

The researcher acknowledges that results were generally limited in scope to the three areas identified, and that application of results beyond the UW-Platteville campus would be difficult to justify because of each school’s unique array of academic programs. However, the research methodology would be easy to replicate, since all undergraduate institutions offer lower-division coursework in Speech Communication.

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