

In-Class Presentations: A Potential Barrier to Success at School?

By Keisha Delarosa

[Note from Center Co-directors:* Our Center is fortunate to be able to benefit from the energy and talents of many UCLA students. Because of her interest in this topic, undergraduate Keisha Delarosa prepared and we slightly edited the following to be shared as part of the Center’s resources.]

My interest in this topic stems from a recent debate about whether assessing public speaking competence in schools is appropriate considering how problematic such presentations can be for shy and anxious students.

I noted that one high school student’s online post calling for in-class presentations to be made voluntary rather than required garnered the support of over 500,000 people on Twitter and was mentioned in numerous articles, including *The Atlantic*. Responding to the post, many students stated that forcing them to partake in such an anxiety-inducing situation for a grade is unfair and harmful to their well-being (e.g., it exacerbates their social anxiety symptoms). Some respondents disagreed, saying that in-class presentations should remain a part of school curriculum even if it means pushing students out of their comfort zone since verbal confidence is such a highly valued skill for succeeding in college and the workforce. An underlying concern in this debate is public speaking anxiety (PSA), and the likelihood that being forced to do an in-class presentation can be harmful to the mental health and school success of a subset of students.

Central to the debate is the English Language Arts Common Core Standards. These standards were designed to promote better verbal and interpersonal communication skills among K-12 students. Where the standards are implemented, students at each grade level are assessed on their ability to effectively present their knowledge to others. For example, sixth graders are expected to use “appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation” when speaking (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010). Beginning in eighth grade and continuing throughout high school, students are assessed on their ability to give effective in-class presentations.

Interview with a High School English Teacher

Aiming to gain more insight on the matter from the perspective of an educator, I turned to an English Language Arts teacher at a college-ready charter high school (where I work as a tutor). I observed one class where the teacher assigned a public speaking assignment to her ninth graders. The teacher first took a couple of minutes to explain to her students that it is normal to feel nervous while public speaking. Following, she proceeded to teach them techniques that could help them ease their nerves.

Just this school year, the high school began implementing “Calm Classroom” mindfulness techniques in classrooms in an effort to make the environment more relaxed and enhance students’ self-awareness, mental focus, and emotional well-being. I noticed that simply paying more attention to the students’ emotional states was helpful in making them feel more understood and supported.

Q. Do you think it is important for students to start practicing their public speaking skills beginning in Kindergarten?

A. Yes, I think it is important that students start practicing early. A good way to start is by making younger kids read aloud and give prepared speeches; presentations can be more nerve-racking if a student is presenting their own ideas.

*The material in this document reflects work done by Keisha Delarosa as part of her involvement with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

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- Q. *What are some ways that teachers can be better prepared to encourage students who are shy or have anxiety to speak up and work on their public speaking skills?*
- A. *In my class I like to use Calm Classroom so students can practice breathing exercises that help with anxiety. I try to have one-on-one talks with my shyest kids just to check in with them to see how they are doing so they understand that I am there for them.*
- Q. *What are some methods you have found to be most effective in helping the students improve their public speaking skills?*
- A. *Before students are expected to present, I take some class time to make sure the students understand that it is completely normal to feel nervous about public speaking. I like to show them this TED Talk that breaks down speech anxiety well.*
(https://www.ted.com/talks/joe_kowan_how_i_beat_stage_fright?language=en)
- Q. *What do you think constitutes effective public speaking? Do you use your own rubric or do you have a set of standards that you have to follow?*
- A. *I do have to use the standards as a guide, but I try to mainly grade based on the amount of effort students put in as well as their commitment to the task and enthusiasm.*

What I Believe Schools Should Consider

Using in-class presentations as a way to assess students' knowledge on a topic can be ineffective if having anxiety prevents them from performing to the best of their ability. When teachers assign in-class presentations, they usually hand out a rubric to let the students know what they will be assessed on following certain educational standards. Rather than focusing so much on the assessment aspect of public speaking, which is often stressful and overwhelming, a shift toward placing more focus on guiding and supporting students to become more confident speakers can lead to better learning and mental health outcomes. Schools should consider looking into ways to teach and assess public speaking competence that are less stressful, more consistent, and give students a sense of autonomy, cultivating a classroom environment that enhances students' self-awareness and is more supportive of shy and anxious students.

One possible alternative to in-class presentations is having students give a presentation in the form of a video recording.

Video presentations require students to practice their presentations, but with the added benefit of having unlimited attempts until they achieve their desired final product. By recording themselves speaking, students do cover the Common Core emphasis on proper volume and clear pronunciation. With respect to teaching use of appropriate eye contact while speaking, there are other ways students can practice this interpersonal skill in the classroom (e.g., using facilitated small group discussions).

Allowing students to record themselves can be a good way to support socially anxious students in decreasing their communication apprehension. The process requires that they assess their own performance by taking on the audience's perspective when watching themselves present. One benefit of self-assessment through a video recording is that it can enhance students' self-confidence in their speaking abilities and, in turn, lead to increased achievement (Ritchie, 2016). Additionally, having students self-assess helps them to see firsthand which areas they need improvement in, encouraging them to focus more on developing their skills (Ritchie, 2016). By self-assessing, students enhance self-awareness and take greater responsibility for self-improvement. And the process is seen as having potential for minimizing the discrepancy between teacher and student evaluations of performance (Tsang, 2017).

With technology increasingly being incorporated into classrooms, video presentations can be a more fitting and relevant way for current and coming generations of students to develop verbal and interpersonal communication skills in ways that reduce their stress and allows them to play a more active role in their education.

Getting assigned a long and important presentation with high stakes grading can be intimidating and overwhelming, causing students to feel pressured, nervous and reluctant. Research done by Beatty (1988) suggests that breaking down presentations or speeches into segments can also improve students' learning outcomes if they practice speaking more often but for shorter, more manageable periods of time and with reduced grading pressure.

For example, students can present their introduction one week with the goal of improving a specific skill. Gradually but consistently exposing students to multiple speaking opportunities throughout the course of the school year can be effective in reducing stress and allowing students to become more comfortable. Research shows that the process of doing smaller speaking tasks is effective not only in improving skills but enhancing speaking confidence (Beatty, 1988). In general, making classroom speaking activities more consistent and manageable can be productive for all students and it can help students with presentation anxiety desensitize fears.

I also think that reducing the anticipatory stress that many students have about public speaking may minimize absenteeism on presentation days.

About Social Anxiety

Social anxiety disorder (SAD) is an intense and irrational fear of being judged, negatively evaluated, or rejected in a social or performance situation and can stem from situations involving performing and/or interacting with others (British Psychological Society, 2013). Going beyond shyness, those with SAD may go to great lengths to avoid participating in certain anxiety-inducing situations. One common performance situation that triggers anxiety is public speaking. While many fear public speaking, public speaking anxiety (PSA) extends beyond nervousness. An individual with a fear of public speaking may experience uncomfortable physiological changes in the form of "heart palpitations, sweating, stomach distress, and nausea" (McCullough et al., 2007). A speaker may also feel a sense of panic that can make it seem as if the mind is "going blank" particularly due to possible feelings of conspicuousness, subordination or dissimilarity to peers or the teacher (Beatty, 1988).

Since the onset of SAD typically begins during adolescence, some research has focused on early intervention for shy children who may be at risk. Recent research conducted by Herbein et al. aimed to improve young children's speaking confidence through a skills training program (2017). Yet one limitation of focusing on elementary school students is that it overlooks adolescents in middle and high school who have anxiety and may not have had the opportunity to benefit from early intervention. Besides skills training, a majority of the research surrounding treatment and intervention for PSA has been useful in suggesting that it is possible to reduce speech anxiety through systematic desensitization and cognitive modification therapy (Allen, Hunter, & Donohue, 1989, Bodie, 2010). These methods usually involve trained professionals, can be time-consuming, and do not always produce long-term results.

Concluding Comments

Public speaking undoubtedly will continue to be a valued skill. Students will be expected to practice verbal and interpersonal communication skills throughout their K-12 education. To avoid doing harm, the process must be supportive of students, especially shy and anxious children and teens.

While there are numerous treatment and therapy options to help individuals with public speaking anxiety, schools should take the initiative to ensure that students are both emotionally supported and well-equipped to succeed at school and beyond. The school's role is especially important since therapy and skills training have their limitations, and of course, many students cannot access professional treatment. As with all facets of teaching, schools must move forward in personalizing the ways that verbal and interpersonal communication skills are taught and assessed, with a particular focus on reducing interfering stress to enhance learning and emotional outcomes.

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- For more on personalizing instruction and providing help when students need special assistance, see
>Addressing barriers to learning: In the classroom and schoolwide
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html
>Improving school improvement
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html