Helping Students Overcome Public Speaking Anxiety in the Classroom  
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 There are few sounds so deafening as that of lingering silence, especially as it falls across the classroom as a student prepares to give a presentation. The situation can not only be uncomfortable for the student, but for the instructor as well. We want our students to be successful in the classroom, but public speaking anxiety can hinder a student’s progress in a class. Often in a 100-level course, undergraduate students are approaching presentations having had little to no experience speaking in this kind of setting. Instead of expecting the worst or dismissing their struggle with public speaking anxiety, how can we make space within our classrooms for students to overcome their anxiety before a presentation while still staying on track? A great way to combat students’ anxiety before an upcoming presentation is to utilize classroom activities which give them a low stakes opportunity to speak in front of their classmates before they are required to do so for a grade. There are various methods to start incorporating these activities into class time.

**1. Choose activities which allow students to tie personal connection to the course material.** Sometimes students are more comfortable sharing something fun or trivial about themselves instead of being expected to dive straight into course content. By using activities that allow the students to share something about themselves, you allow them to practice their public speaking by talking about a topic with which they are deeply familiar – themselves. For example, students can do an activity based around listening and personal stories. Ask students to find a partner and sit with their backs to each other. Each partner takes a turn telling a story about a funny or significant moment in their life while the other partner writes the story done without asking any clarifying questions. After sharing their stories, each partner takes a turn sharing the other partner’s story with the class and seeing how many details they were able to correctly recall while both writing and listening to the story. This allows the students to find humor in any errors made when telling the story and consequently learn to ease public speaking anxiety and messing up. In [this article](https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/an-exercise-to-reduce-public-speaking-anxiety-and-create-community-in-the-classroom/) from Faculty Focus, Dr. Stacey Peterson suggests using an activity involving the story behind each student’s name to help ease students into speaking in the classroom.

**2. Utilize activities with movement**   
 Another way to help students become more comfortable speaking in a classroom setting is to get them comfortable with the physical space in which the class takes place. By using activities that involve movement, students are challenged to explore more of the space around them and speak with students they might otherwise avoid throughout the semester. An activity that could serve this purpose is to provide the students with notecards that ask ice breaker questions, such as “What is your favorite color?” or “If you could have any superpower, what would you choose?”, and give one card to each student. Have each student go around the room and ask their question to a partner, then after answering the partner’s question they trade notecards and find a new partner. This continues until students have moved around the room and been asked multiple questions by multiple other students. This way, the students are challenged to practice speaking in front of a smaller audience while also physically moving around a classroom and interacting with other students beyond their chosen seat.

**3. Provide students with practical options.**   
 Not every student is going to love the idea of approaching a student they have never spoken to before to ask a silly question or want to get up in front of the classroom to act out a skit. For the students who are more reserved and need time to prepare in a more personal space, you can provide activities and practices to be done outside of class time. This may look like providing students with worksheets to complete or tips to practice that will help ease their public speaking anxiety. Tami Strang (2013) [suggests an activity](https://blog.cengage.com/top_blog/tips-for-students-overcoming-your-fears-of-public-speaking/) that asks students to address their specific fear around public speaking and from where that fear may have originated.

Even if your specific course content is not focused on public speaking, finding ways to incorporate public speaking practice and activities into your material may give students a more diverse learning experience as well as enhance the quality of discussion in your classroom. When it comes to easing public speaking anxiety for students, the key is practice. The more opportunity the student has to speak in the classroom setting, whether it is through a small group activity or after addressing their fear of speaking in a more private setting, the easier it will be for them to overcome their anxiety and give a great presentation.

References:

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