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How I Used Portfolios and Videotape to Improve Student Performance and Lived to Tell About It

Marilyn Brooks

Let's be clear about this from the beginning.
I am not a researcher.

To me, a semantic differential could be part of my transmission, a Chi Square is a dull fraternity boy, and statistical significance is not a goal to which I aspire.

I am a teacher.

I am curious and I want to be smart about what I do to improve student performance. To that end, I seized the moment and took the opportunity to test out two hypotheses I had about teaching speech communication.

The Hypotheses

First, I hypothesized that if I were to make self-evaluation as meaningful as it could be, I would need to require students to evaluate their own performance over time by looking at a videotape of all their speeches. It seemed like common sense, but having never actually consistently videotaped student performance, I decided to begin my study by taping only one of my three classes. That way I could see if the tapes really made a difference. I was not prepared for how immediate and dramatic the improvement would be, nor was I prepared for the overwhelmingly positive student response at the end of the semester.

In addition, I wanted to reevaluate my use of the portfolio grading system in the speech class. I eliminated grades on individual speaking assignments several years ago, and require students to document their progress over time by accumulating a portfolio of outlines, peer and instructor evaluations, and self-evaluations culminating in an end-of-the-marking period evaluation where students participate in determining their marking period grade. From my side of the desk, this process had seemed to be quite successful, and students had consistently agreed it was a good system. But my high school added ninth graders to the program last year, and I was curious to see

if the younger students could handle not having grades as an immediate form of feedback. So when the master schedule handed me three sections of Speech Communication, I decided to test the portfolio system and the videotape premise by structuring the assessment differently for all three sections: one with my standard portfolio, one with portfolio and videotape, and one with a traditional point-based grading system. What I learned reinforced my commitment to a portfolio assessment plan.

The Selection Process

One reason for my disclaimer as a researcher comes from the number of variables that a classroom teacher can NOT control. Time of day, gender and class distribution, student grade point average, and the unmeasurable "classroom chemistry" are all determined by computers and fate. All of them undermine the statistical validity of genuine classroom research. I determined to use some primitive population distribution and attitudinal disposition information to decide which section used which assessment plan. While this preliminary data collection was limited in its scope, it did guide my initial matching of grading method with students.

Another reason for my initial disclaimer as a researcher is my commitment to student success. In the name of "science," I was not going to unduly contribute to a threatening classroom atmosphere in a manner that would damage student confidence or performance. Simply put, I would not put a videotape in the class that demonstrated the greatest apprehension about being videotaped—especially when students knew that I was using them as guinea pigs in an experiment. The knowledge that "other students didn't have to go through this" could seriously affect some students' attitudes toward the project. So I admit that I chose the class that was most open to the suggestion of being the videotaped group. If the cam-

era becomes a regular partner in all my future speech classes, the variable of "persecution of just our class" will no longer be a concern.

At the beginning of the semester, I took a couple of days to size up the classes and decide which class would have which system. To help me choose, I used three methods.

First, I looked at a distribution by grade in each class. Speech Communication is a one-semester course that is required for graduation in our district. Because it can be taken any time during the four-year high school schedule, it is frequently chosen by freshmen. However, students who take both foreign language and music electives frequently cannot fit the class into their schedule until later in their high school career. Consequently, the class often has a mix of ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders. Looking at the fourth, fifth, and sixth hour sections of Speech Communication, the grade-level distribution broke out this way.

Grade	4th Hour	5th Hour	6th Hour
9th	17	13	23
10th	4	11	1
11th	5	5	2
12th	2	1	2

While in many ways, this data is inconclusive, the dominant freshman population in the sixth-hour class was a noteworthy variable. Fifth hour seemed to have the most even distribution of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

The second variable I used in determining the assessment plan was the student response to an attitude survey that I distributed on the first day of class. Students responded to eight questions using a five-point disagree/agree scale. The statements included:

- I have had some experience with public speaking beyond class assignments.
- I participate in activities where I perform (alone or with a group) in front of others.
- Performing in front of groups of people makes me nervous.
- I am pretty good at identifying my own weaknesses and finding ways to overcome them.
- I consider myself a reasonably good writer.
- I sometimes use videotape as a way of looking at what I do.
- The idea of using videotape to look at what I do makes me uncomfortable.
- I expect to do well in this class.

I calculated student response to the survey based on simple percentages of students who responded in each of the five separations between disagree and agree. While results were not dramatically different, the fifth-hour class had slightly more experience in public speaking situations, and had a slightly more positive response to the questions dealing with the use of videotape.

The third variable I used in assigning assessment plan to each section was the intuitive teacher assessment of classroom chemistry after three days of interacting with each class. Pure scientists would rail against such a biased assessment, but real world classroom teachers know they can tell a lot about classroom climate and the potential for success from listening to students talk, and from watching their interactions in the classroom.

Fourth hour, meeting before lunch, was an amiable group of diverse students ranging from academically struggling freshmen to highly confident second-semester seniors. While I refrained from using a special education designation as a variable in my decision-making, fourth hour did have more students for whom a public speaking class would pose a strong personal confidence challenge.

Fifth hour, right after lunch, was a gregarious, energetic group of students who appeared to be positive and supportive of each other, even in the early days of the semester. While there were clearly a couple of students who would be intimidated by any speaking experience, the camaraderie of the class seemed strong from the first day. There were also more students who had already participated in activities that are viewed by an audience, including athletics, music, and dance.

Sixth hour seemed to be affected from the beginning by the time of day. For many, this was the last class of the day (some students take advantage of the opportunity to take a seventh-hour class, but most end their day sixth hour). There were significantly more freshmen in this class, and the group was generally more easily distracted during the usual get-acquainted activities of the opening days of the semester.

Consequently, consistent with my teacher bias for structuring a classroom that encourages success, and still stretching my curiosity as a classroom scientist, I determined that fifth hour held the best potential for being open-minded about videotaping. Sixth hour seemed to be most in need of the immediate feedback that traditional grading would provide. Fourth hour fell amiably into the established portfolio method.

The decision made, I proceeded to announce the program to the students. They seemed intrigued by the notion of being part of an experiment. And, as I expected, at the end of fifth hour, two panic-stricken freshman girls approached my desk. "Mrs. Brooks! I can't possibly be videotaped! I'll faint, I just know it!" cried one. "I can't do this, Mrs. Brooks! I'll have to get my schedule changed!" cried the other. Calmly, I encouraged them not to panic, not to lose sleep, and not to drop the class. They stayed. They survived. Their comments are included in the results section of this article.

The Experiment in Process

In order to focus the results on the assessment plan, I was careful to be sure all three sections had

the same instruction, the same assignments, the same time in class to prepare and perform, and the same performance standards. All classes participated in coaching groups throughout the semester. As part of the performance class structure, students are assigned to a five-member coaching group for the semester. Coaching group members listen to each other in rehearsal and coach each other on content and delivery, write comments to each other during full-class performances, and give oral critiques after the speech in class.

What varied between the portfolio and traditional grading groups was the presence of points/letter grades on individual speaking assignments. In portfolio classes, students received only written and oral feedback that identified both strengths and weaknesses of the performance. Based on those comments, each student then wrote a post-performance self-evaluation. None of these evaluation instruments contained a letter grade. In the sixth-hour graded section, each speech, each outline, and each self-evaluation received a point value and was returned to the students with the grade attached. All classes completed an end-of-the-marking period self-evaluation that required them to look back on their performance and assess their growth over time.

In the videotaped class, all students had their own videotape, thanks to a grant from a local foundation, that became a video portfolio of their speeches throughout the semester. Beginning with the first major speech (a sales speech of 4-6 minutes in length with specific outline requirements), each speech was recorded on the student's personal tape. Thanks to the cooperation of some loyal fifth-hour students, we carried the tripod and the camera all over the building, from the gymnasium, to the cooking lab, to the auto lab, and even out to the parking lot to tape a speech on horse grooming.

During the post-performance self-evaluation, these students viewed their own tape as part of the reflective process. Media Center personnel helped us set up six viewing stations, one for each coaching group. Students then had the choice of viewing the tape privately, or viewing tapes with other members of the coaching groups. Students were very good about respecting each other's privacy. If someone said they'd rather watch the tape alone, other group members stepped out and waited for the speaker to finish the viewing. The videotape became a part of the post-performance feedback that students used in writing their self-evaluation. At the end of the semester, students had the choice to either take the tape home to show their parents what they had done, or to leave the tape so it could be recycled in future years for future speakers. I reassured students that I would never use their videotape as a model in another class without their permission; the primary purpose of the tape was for speakers to be their own audience—not to create embarrassing possibilities for the speakers. (No "Speech Class Funniest Video" candidates here!)

The Results

As a classroom researcher, I examined results in two formats. First, I looked at grade distributions at the end of the third marking period. Because the final exam is a paper and pencil test, I did not want it included in what was essentially an oral performance assessment. Second, I looked at student responses to both the grading and the videotape variables. The results confirmed my commitment to both the portfolio and the videotape methods.

In looking at grades, I considered two measures. The first was student grades in the third marking period. If we are truly using feedback and reflection (graded or ungraded) to help improve student performance, their best performance should be in the third marking period after the best instruction and performance opportunities have been accomplished. Of course it is important to keep in mind that any grade comparisons between classes must be tempered with the understanding that the grade point averages of the students in each class were never part of the process. Every class has strong and weak students, and their academic success in other areas will affect their ability to succeed in this class. With this in mind, I charted third marking period grades.

Third Marking Period Grades, Distributed by Class

Letter Grade	4th Hour (portfolio)	5th Hour (portfolio w/tape)	6th Hour (points/grades)
A's	9	15	10
B's	15	9	10
C's	3	1	4
D's	1	2	3
E's	0	3	1

Conclusions from these data are limited. It appears that more students earned A's and B's under the portfolio system than did under the traditional grading system. This data is consistent with my classroom observation that the climate in the sixth-hour class was consistently more negative about the evaluations they received; more concern about points, argument about assessments, and more complaining about expectations. That kind of climate cloud affects morale over the semester. I am confident that the standards for success were consistent from section to section; students were more likely to question those standards in the section receiving letter grades on individual assignments.

It is also clear that the portfolio method cannot "save" students who refuse to complete assignments. Some students falsely assume early in the semester that if nothing is graded, there are no standards so they can easily pass on anything they do. Unfortunately, some students choose not to complete the required performances in the class, and consequently do not receive credit for the class. This is true in either the portfolio or the graded system.

In looking at the two portfolio class results, it is interesting to note that more students received A's

in the videotaped class than in the non-taped class. Some of this is no doubt attributable to individual student motivation and grade point average. It is consistent, however, with my classroom observation that student performance in the fifth-hour class improved dramatically when the camera appeared in the classroom. As one junior observed, "The videotape was uncomfortable to watch, but it helps to catch things that you wouldn't normally see for yourself. It allows you to become your own audience." The coincidental inversion of 15 "A's", 9 "B's" in fifth hour to 15 "B's", 9 "A's" in fourth hour makes me wonder if we would have had more A's in fourth hour if we had used the videotape in that class too.

The second examination of grades was less conclusive than the first, but still provided some insights into the assessment system. I charted how much student performance improved between the first and the third marking periods. I classified the improvement in four categories: grades went down, grades stayed the same, grades went up by half a grade, and grades went up by one grade or more.

Grade Variation	4th Hour (portfolio)	5th Hour (portfolio w/tape)	6th Hour (points/grades)
Grades declined by half to a full grade	5	4	2
Grades stayed the same	7	12	11
Grades improved by half a grade	14	12	11
Grades improved one grade or more	2	2	4

A cursory examination of the chart would suggest that the graded system actually encouraged students to improve more dramatically. However, some of the 4 students included in that assessment went from non-performance "E's" to passable "C's." Such improvement could happen in either system when the report card arrives home and students are subjected to influences beyond the classroom. The data is also difficult to interpret because many of the students whose grades did not show improvement were consistently doing "A" work. However, an examination of the data did lead me to question what it is in the class that really does influence improvement. Extensive verbal comments and frequent opportunities for self-evaluation and reflection are consistent to all three sections, and perhaps it is the value of the verbal feedback and not necessarily the assessment system that allows all students to find ways to improve. Testing that hypothesis would require going to a system where students received only letter grades, and the communication teacher in me would not allow that to happen solely for the sake of generating numbers.

In addition to simple data collection, I asked stu-

dents to respond to the evaluation system at the end of the semester. Students were consistently positive about the portfolio system, with only one student out of 58 in fourth and fifth hours indicating he would have preferred a points/grade system. Such an observation usually comes from a student who likes to be able to calculate the grade point on a daily or weekly basis. Most students concede that even though they did not receive letter grades, they usually had a clear sense of how they were doing in the class. One student said, "I think the portfolio is a great idea because no matter what happens, the grade is done on growth. It gives the kids that are not good at speech a chance to work their best and improve at their own rate. I feel that I always had a good idea of my grade, and I would continue with the portfolio system." Another student observed, "The portfolio process is nice for students because they actually get graded on how well they do in ways of effort, thought, productivity and learning." These comments are consistent with student responses to portfolio grading from other semesters.

The student response to videotaping was overwhelmingly positive. In fact, the most negative response I could find came from a young man who said, "Yes, it (the videotape) helped me work on diction. Yes (you should continue to use it) so they (future students) can go through the same torment as we went through."

The two reluctant young ladies referred to earlier also responded positively. One girl said, "The videotape did help me to see the ums and ahs. It also helped me improve my eye contact and movements." The other girl told me, "I thought it was very helpful in many ways. seeing your posture, gestures, eye contact, and overall movement was different at first but as long as you REALLY watch your video and pay full attention, it will help. I do recommend this but it takes more time and so you have to be dedicated."

Other students showed genuine enthusiasm for the process.

"Although I really didn't like seeing myself, it helped me to visually see what I need to work on. I am a very visual learner so the best way for me to learn from my old speeches is to watch myself."

"Videotaping was helpful, also fun. It helped me visually see what I did wrong. It is neat to be able to see how much you have improved in half a year."

"Yes, it (the videotape) was very helpful. (At first I hated it). It helped by seeing yourself, not just reading about yourself. Hearing your little mistakes. Seeing the podium and how I always leaned on it. Yes, I recommend you to use this for following classes. I don't think I would have improved as much if I didn't get my speech taped. It helped."

"Advice to future students: Ask for the videotape grading system because it really helps you by showing you how you look from another perspective."

"I actually benefited from the videotape. It gave me the chance to go back and actually see for myself

what things I did well and not-so-well. If I hadn't been able to see what I was doing, I might not have known what I needed to change or what not to change. My recommendation would be to use the videotape method in all of your classes because even if it was uncomfortable at first, it really helps."

"The videotape was very helpful to me because without it I wouldn't have realized half the stuff I was doing if I hadn't watched it. It can really help you if you pay attention to the tape and really look for ways you can improve. Basically, you have to want to improve and the video helped me to do that. It helped me to realize my mistakes and also what good I had done to really focus on the things I need to work on. Although the future speech communication people will kick me for saying this—even though it's the 100% truth—think the videotapes should continue to be used. They are so weird at first, but as soon as you get over the fear of people you don't know and that lens pointing straight at you and only you, then everything is fine. Also, as I said before—it helped me to see what things I did good and bad while speaking, and if you focus on the bad to make them good, then you will become a very distinguished speaker."

Final Thoughts

I learned a lot from doing this experiment. That observation in itself is valuable. After many years of teaching, it is easy to become complacent and assume that whatever I'm doing works well because I continue to do it. Taking the time and effort to focus my attention on my assessment system forced me to ask meaningful questions about what I do, why I do it, and whether or not it really affects student performance. The inquiry process itself kept me on my toes.

What I learned validated my choices. I had always believed that the portfolio system allowed students to track their own progress, and at the same time contributed to a less threatening atmosphere in a class that is already fraught with performance anxiety and resentment of a required class. Focusing student attention on the strengths and weaknesses of their performance instead of attaching a letter grade that fosters hasty judgment and flawed self-description should encourage students to do better work next time. That's what I want as a teacher. That's what students are telling me happens under the system. I'm not naive enough to believe that some students aren't telling me just what I want to hear, but the consistency of the comments over time convinces me that the system serves student needs well.

The use of the videotape taught me two very valuable lessons. First, if I truly believe that student reflection is an important part of the learning process and contributes to making students life-long learners, then I need to help structure the reflection so that students get the most out of the effort. In a performance class, viewing their own performance is essential. I admit I had shied away from the videotape because students' initial reaction is one of ap-

prehension, and I had consoled myself that reducing their apprehension would nurture their comfort in speaking. What the students clearly told me is that while the process is uncomfortable, it is certainly worth doing. Making them part of their own audience helped them to improve. The experiment gives me the confidence to go on to other groups of novice speakers and say, "I know you are uncomfortable with this idea, but your fellow students can tell you that it really helped them in the long run." And I have the testimony to prove it!

The success of the videotape process also reminds me that at times I am guilty of not setting the bar for student performance high enough. Perhaps I have underestimated what students can do, and until I do challenge them to stretch beyond their comfort limits, neither I nor they will know what they really can achieve. In an ego-threatening class like speech, establishing a supportive environment is crucial. But support should cultivate growth, not inhibit its potential. You can set the bar higher, so long as you teach the students how to get over it.

You may be surprised at the heights they can reach.

About the Author

Marilyn Brooks teaches Humanities, Speech, English and French at H. H. Dow High School in Midland, Michigan.