Final Report for Pedagogical Inquiry Grant
Janis Be and Aarón Aguilar-Ramírez, Hispanic Studies
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Designing Meaningful Formal Oral Communication Assessments and Fostering Dialogue across Difference in the Introductory-Level Humanities Classroom

Following an external review in 2018-19, Janis Be and Aarón Aguilar-Ramírez created two innovative first-year courses *Contemporary Latin American Cinema: An Introduction* (HISP 144) and *US Latinx Literatures and Cultures: An Introduction* (HISP 143) to provide a solid foundation for discipline-specific work to the entire campus community as well as broader, transferable skills in formal oral communication. These courses train students to use effective oral communication skills in presenting information, engaging in literary and visual analysis, and advancing critical arguments.

In applying for this grant we aimed to build our skills as professors for effectively creating and assessing oral projects, as well as improving student implementation of visual and auxiliary technologies. For the grant work, we identified three specific areas of focus: formal oral communication competence, heightened awareness and effective use of visual and auxiliary technology, and dialogue across difference. We address each of these areas in detail below.

Early grant work consisted of locating print and online materials related to oral communication and use of technology in the humanities classroom (see recommended sources below) and then engaging in collaborative reading and discussion of the pedagogical research. We each, collaboratively but independently, implemented new activities and assessment techniques in our respective classrooms over the course of two consecutive fall semesters. As we taught our independent classes, we performed peer observations and discussed successes and areas of improvement of our classroom exercises and our distinct assessment models. We have then each made adjustments to our assessment methods based on the research, peer discussions and observations, and also upon student feedback across both courses.

Formal Oral Communication Competence

In our application we stated the following goals for this area:

to develop techniques and strategies as instructors to implement effective assessments that expand first-year students' formal oral communication and presentation skills. Specifically, we want our students to: improve skills in oral exposition and argumentation; acquire techniques for overcoming nervousness, apprehension, and anxiety associated with formal oral presentations; grow as teammates and collaborators in group formal presentations; and take more seriously the importance of oral communication and assigned presentations in the classroom setting.

to build our own skills in the following ways: developing meaningful oral assessments, establishing clear assessment expectations, generating effective rubrics and equitable evaluation guidelines, exploring fruitful opportunities for student self-assessment, and improving implementation of oral assessment into overall course design.

Through our research and discussion over the last year, we devised new oral communication assignments, assessments, and feedback models that allowed us to meet the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic while also advancing our goals of providing students with foundational tools and techniques that would prepare them for the oral senior assessment in the Hispanic Studies Major. In 143, for example, these aims were met in two ways: oral communication goals were self-generated by students, and strong mechanisms for student reflection, professor feedback, and peer affirmation were incorporated throughout the process. Students first reflected on their own strengths and areas of growth in oral communication, and used these reflections to generate *clear, measurable,* and *achievable* goals for each assignment. After completion of

the oral communication assignment, students provided *affirmative* feedback for peers, noting what worked especially well in the presentations of others. Finally, after receiving affirmative feedback from peers and the professor, students completed a self-reflection in which they assessed how well they met their goals.

We found that this approach of self-generated oral communication outcomes and self-assessment accomplishes several important goals: students build increasing self-awareness of their strengths and areas of improvement in oral communication competencies that are important to them; students focus on establishing their own goals and targets of growth for the semester, rather than meeting goals pre-determined by the professor, and thus build a foundation for processual, self-guided learning that can continue beyond the semester; the professor is decentered as an "authoritative" figure that determines what "effective oral communication" means, allowing students to claim ownership of their own learning and affirming diverse definitions of oral communication effectiveness. Through this work, we found that the best way to help students become more effective oral communicators in the long-term is to help them develop a meaningful, sustainable *process* for identifying personal learning targets, establishing self-generated goals, and engaging in thoughtful reflections on outcomes.

Heightened Awareness and Effective Use of Visual and Auxiliary Technology

In our application we stated the following goals for this area:

to challenge students to use PowerPoint more skillfully while diversifying the auxiliary technologies they employ in formal oral communication. Through this Grant, we want to guide our students in the following: learning to use visual and auxiliary technologies more effectively in formal presentation; becoming aware of the importance of posture, body language, eye contact, and voice modulation as well as the impact of distracting behaviors (nervous giggling; playing with hair, twirling rings, etc), speech patterns ("like"), and nervous tics when presenting in front of peers; actively engaging peers during formal presentations through more effective means; and better utilizing PowerPoint even as they experiment with other platforms (i.e., Prezi, handouts, blackboards, google docs).

The skills we want to develop as instructors include designing targeted and creative oral assignments, facilitating interactive presentation formats, increasing our understanding of our own role as instructors when students lead discussion, and conveying the value of oral communication more effectively.

While conducting preliminary research, we reflected on what it would look like for us to guide our students in becoming aware of posture, body language, eye contact, voice modulation and the impact of distracting behaviors; we were concerned about the ways in which articulating any such behaviors as "distracting" or "ineffective" explicitly (in rubrics, for example) or implicitly might do more harm than good for students who are already feeling nervous or self-conscious about certain areas of growth. We found that by establishing self-generated goals, offering and receiving affirmative feedback, and conducting regular self-reflections, students were likely to identify and work through the corporal and behavioral mechanics of oral presentations on their own. Often, students were actually relieved when they received affirmative feedback about behaviors they felt self-conscious about. In short, we found that the self-guided approach described in the previous section was also effective in allowing students to identify and improve on the corporal and behavioral aspects of oral communication.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to think creatively about our oral communication assignment design and the technologies that would make assignments possible. In HISP 143, for example, we implemented an innovative video essay assignment through the Flipgrid application. Rather than submitting written analytical essays as originally planned, students instead submitted video essays that were shared, with prior permission from all students, with the entire class for viewing. As a class, we took the opportunity provided by this technology to reflect on the collective knowledge students produced through their work;

students praised the analyses of their peers, noting specific argumentation techniques, use textual evidence, and rhetorical devices that they found especially effective in their peers' video essays. In their feedback of the assignment, students praised this technology for the unique possibilities it offers for engaging with the work of their peers.

Dialogue Across Difference

In our application we stated the following goals for this area:

to enhance our teaching practices for fostering meaningful participation in difficult conversations among first- and second-year college students. Our goal is that students will be better prepared to engage in dialogue across difference, particularly on sensitive topics dealing with race, ethnicity, nationality, and other social categories relating to national and hemispheric systems of power and inequality. We strive for students to incorporate new techniques for discussion across difference through in-class student-led oral presentations or discussions

Our personal aims as instructors include improving discussion and conversation formats to better involve all students in meaningful conversation, devising teaching techniques for conducting engaging discussion of difficult topics in the 100-level classroom, and improving modeling strategies for engaging first- and second-year students in conversation.

The biggest challenge or limitation to this year and half long project was the global pandemic that forced the first iteration of HISP 143 to be taught online. Ultimately, this event significantly impacted our immediate focus, placing an even greater emphasis on various uses of technology as a necessity of remote learning. We were faced additionally with the challenge of sustaining dynamic and engaged presentations despite students' zoom fatigue. Difficult topics of difference are also more difficult to address without the important nuances of in-person communication. This grant work is, however, very much a work in progress, and in future iterations of both 143 and 144 we will place greater emphasis on dialogue across difference.

The biggest areas of success are the self-guided model for improving oral communication skills and techniques. Additionally, the video essay assignment, borne out of necessity during the pandemic, will be carried over to the in-person classroom in the future, particularly given the enthusiastic student feedback regarding the value of this format. More traditional written essays become something of a private conversation between the student and professor. With this model, students learn from each other.

We found it to be highly rewarding to design these introductory-level courses, to coordinate our efforts to enhance student performance with respect to formal oral communication and presentations, and to improve our own knowledge of best practices in designing, guiding, and assessing student-led class discussions and oral projects. As a first step in sharing the results of our work, we here provide a short list of what we considered to be highly relevant and useful resources (in English). This work could also be presented at a future CTL luncheon upon request.

Recommended Resources

Deanna P. Dannels, Patyricia R. Palmerton, Amy L. Housley Gaffney. *Oral Communication in the Disciplines: A Resource for Teacher Development and Training* (2016).

Duarte, Nancy. *Slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Presentations* (2008).
     Resonate: Present Visual Stories that Transform Audiences (2010).
     Illuminate: Ignite Change trhough Speeches, Stories, Ceremonies, and Symbols (2016).

Schwabish, Jonathan. *Better Presentations: A Guide for Scholars, Researchers, and Wonks* (2017).

Winston, Patrick. "How to Speak." Youtube. **https://youtu.be/Unzc731iCUY**