Tip Sheet: Public Speaking in the Classroom

Here are a few ‘key principles’ to keep in mind when you are preparing to speak in front of others, whether it is in the classroom, at a conference, in an interview, or as part of a seminar. The principles are deliberately broad so that they can be applied to a range of disciplines and contexts.

**Key Principles of Communication:**

We are all always communicating. There are three main registers of communication: 

*Body language, Tone, and Content.* To be as effective as possible, we must be actively aware of all 3.

**Goal and Audience:** What do you want your given audience to do/remember? **Be clear about your Goal. Modify your Goal to appeal to your specific Audience.** (You can change your goal, but not your audience!)

**Credibility:** “Why should I listen to you?” **Tell your audience how you know what you know.** Have you done research/ taken a class/ received your degree/ done this before/ had personal experience in a given area? **Do you have common ground with your audience?** This can also help establish credibility (“I am like you, I know that this information will help you as it has me…”).

**Tips for Non-verbal and Vocal Communication:**

### Physical Communication

- **Take up space.** Stand with your feet hip distance apart, fully facing your audience.
- **Make eye contact.** Spend a few seconds with each person you look at.
- **Avoid defensive postures:** arms crossed, hands in pockets, hands clasped behind or in front of body.
- **Avoid fiddling with props.** Put down the chalk/marker when you are not using it. If you know you play with jewelry, don’t wear it; if you play with your hair, pull it back. Empty your pockets of change or keys if needed.
- **Smile!** Even if you don’t feel like it; it’ll put your audience at ease and soon you’ll feel better!

### Vocal Communication:

Be aware of your habits in the following areas:

- **Volume** – how loud you speak in relation to size of space and audience
- **Pitch** – where in your voice you speak (high/low/monotone)
- **Rate** – Speed, how slow or fast you speak
- **Vocal Variety** – how often you change your pitch, rate, and volume

Together these aspects create **Tone:** the emotion, confidence, enthusiasm with which you speak.

- **Avoid filler words:** um/uh/sorta/like/y’know; replace them with silence. **Pauses** help you and your audience.
- **Avoid upspeak:** turning statements into questions by using upward inflection after all statements. Picture exclamation points after statements; silently say “dammit!” after a declarative statement, such as your name.

### Know Yourself to Help Yourself: How do your nerves manifest themselves?

**Note what happens when you get up to speak.** Do you sweat/ shake/ mind goes blank/ pace/ talk too fast/ and so on? Knowing what to expect will keep you from feeling thrown off in the moment. Anxiety is a form of Energy!

**Anticipate and prepare:**

- Write yourself notes to SLOW DOWN in the margins of you notes; take a deep breath if your mind goes blank
- Warm-up and get some exercise before hand to release nervous energy in your body
- Do not drink too much caffeine before presenting, but bring water
- Build in some meaningful movement (not pacing!) to use some of that nervous energy
- Make sure your blood sugar is not too low (don’t forget to eat!)

**DO NOT tell your audience you are nervous.** Things are never as apparent from the outside as the inside.

**Be other-centered:** Remember that you are speaking in service of you audience. Everything you do is to help them learn/ remember/ take action. The less you focus on yourself, the less nervous you will be.

-- Adapted from Elise Morrison, Associate Director for Speaking Instruction, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning