Phaedrus: I see that you will not let me off until I speak in some fashion or other...

Socrates wrote little, but spoke volumes. He valued interaction between the speaker and the listener more than he did the invisible relationship between author and reader. Today, educators charged with teaching composition strive to mold students into competent communicators of ideas, and the written word is the locus of instruction. The spoken word, too, can be an effective tool for writing instruction. A recent oral presentation assignment in a freshman writing seminar at Case Western Reserve University revealed a fascinating—if not logically apparent—correlation between students’ ability to prepare and deliver cogent, oral presentations and their ability to write clear, cogent, college-level essays. I would like to spend a few written words considering this freshman oral presentation exercise to illumine more fully its effectiveness and shortcomings in the classroom as well as the pedagogical assumptions this exercise challenges and promotes.

First, we should review the assignment. It was as follows:

Prepare a 5-minute oral presentation on an example of slavery in a specific country or culture outside of Rome before the 18th century. Pay careful attention to be sure you take a position, inform the reader of this position, and avoid simply providing an historical overview. Use no fewer than 4 sources in your research. Submit a bibliography and outline upon completion of the presentation. Hint: 1 page of 12 pt. double-spaced text takes about 2½ minutes to read aloud before an audience.

The students in this freshman seminar had completed two writing assignments and revisions to each of these assignments prior to receiving the oral presentation assignment. This assignment was designed to provide the students the opportunity to research and present on a topic of their choosing within the scope of the course dealing with the History of Slavery. With rather broad parameters, the students were challenged to choose, research, and defend a topic in a concise oral presentation. They were given only four days to complete the assignment. Students were expected to listen critically to their peers’ oral presentations and to discern the speaker’s key points as well as to note the effectiveness of the presentation.

What began as an exercise designed to give the students a break from writing a paper became a valuable exercise revealing the formative relationship between student’s speaking and writing. Specifically, the students with more developed, competent writing skills gave more organized, persuasive presentations. Presentations by students with less competent writing skills were poorly organized and, therefore, confusing to the listeners. There were no exceptions to these observations. Equally interesting, students with less competent command of language (vocabulary, syntax, etc.) spoke as they wrote, but lacked neither confidence in their speech nor charisma in their presentation. That is, although their reports were confusing or ungrounded, the speakers were themselves
Robert Zoellner’s article, “Talk Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition” and George Kennedy’s earlier research into the effectiveness of talking about a topic prior to writing about it provide interesting grounding for our discussion. Zoellner determined that students have a consistent, confident voice when talking, but often lack these traits when writing. Peter Elbow, more recently than Zoellner, has expounded upon the role of voice and the importance of tapping into the student’s voice to produce more confident, compelling writers.¹ I want to re-consider the theories of these important voice pedagogues by suggesting, as I have above, that students’ voices are revealed in their speech as well as in their writing: those students with a confident command of vocabulary and organized thinking (if there are such creatures) speak and write in this way. Likewise, students with a confident voice but a poor command of language speak and write in this way. (Certainly, there are other iterations, such as the shy student who dares not speak despite her/his exceptional command of language revealed in her/his writing.) Kenneth Bruffee, in his essay on collaborative learning, writes, “If my talk is narrow, superficial, biased, and confined to clichés, my thinking is likely to be so too.”² Bruffee continues, “The point, therefore is that writing always has its roots deep in the acquired ability to carry on the social symbolic exchange we call conversation… . The way they talk with each other determines the way they will think and the way they will write.”³

To hear—rather than read—a student’s voice reveals that student’s command of language, community of thought, confidence with the audience, and their ability to organize and present ideas. Furthermore, hearing a student’s voice reveals the listeners’ ability to be engaged, to divulge their communal expectations of language, dissemination of ideas, etc. This Socratic relationship between speaker and listener is what further enhanced the quality of this oral presentation assignment. In class on the Monday following the Friday presentations, the students willingly engaged in an open critique of the presentations. In so doing, they provided an interesting insight into the relative effectiveness of each oral report. When asked which they thought to be the best presentation, the students unanimously selected the three presentations that the co-instructors had rated as the three best as well. Clearly, many of the students could discern the necessary components of a well-formed, well-argued presentation. I encouraged each of them to translate this perceptiveness into critique of their own writing.

A few final thoughts. Despite the range of competency revealed in the reports, the enthusiasm with which each presenter gave their reports was consistently high. As with most assignments of this nature, time was our enemy. We had too little time to critique each presentation and to provide constructive feedback at the time. Generally, we were

³ Bruffee, 400.
able to provide the students with advice on how to use this assignment as a way to understand how they form and present ideas, both orally and written. To take an idea from inception to presentation, from research to final product requires hard work, stumbling, re-writing, re-ordering, and review. This assignment revealed these necessary lessons.

Certainly, this exercise is no philosopher’s stone for writing instruction. Any of us working in the field of writing instruction know that hoping for a quick-fix or the answer to improve student writing is futile. Valuable is the activity that provides insight into how students use language, both written and spoken. Assessing students’ understanding of and competency with the written and spoken word is a critical first step toward effective writing instruction. This oral presentation exercise offered just such insight.
Sources:


Saunders makes the claim that students gain confidence by doing oral presentations. This confidence is manifest in the students’ writing subsequent to the oral presentation. In Saunders’ model, the oral assignment should be related to an upcoming paper topic/assignment; the oral presentation then becomes a first step in the writing of the paper. Saunders suggests that the students should be given freedom to choose from a broad range of topics for the first oral presentation (to avoid becoming bored with some teacher-imposed topic(s)). Rather than speaking from notes or an outline, the students should, according to Saunders, read their paper. The benefits of such an approach are as follows: the students (speaker and listeners) hear the presentation verbatim and can critique it accordingly. Informal speech, or speaking from an outline, can often muddle content. Discussion after the presentation must focus on content.