

Twelve Pretty Cool Ideas for Speaking In Courses

1. Conduct a "staged debate." □ Holly Hanson had her students work carefully with an article by Robert Kaplan on Africa--an article that most students found somewhat offensive. Then one of our colleagues visited her class as Robert Kaplan. Students had to argue with him about his position. This required them not only to get much more clear about exactly what he was (and was not claiming), but also about their reasons for disagreement.

2. Use oral exams. □ Oral exams get students' attention, even if they count for only a small part of the total grade (although there is no reason why it needs to be small). Eleanor Townsley uses this format for oral exams: she tells students ahead of time that in her first question she will ask what her second question should be, and that her second question will ask about the answer to the first. (This allows each student to begin in an area that she has prepared, and where she is comfortable.) She tells them that the answer to the first question will count, as well as the answer to the second. (This requires the student to suggest an interesting question, and not a simple one.) Then the exam takes off from there, with some common questions for all students, but others geared to exploring how deeply a particular student has understood an area of interest to her.

3. Put on a conference, a summit, a crisis meeting. □ Eva Paus organizes a conference for her Economic Development seminar. Students take on roles and are required to argue within those roles. One student might be the chair of the International Monetary Fund, another the president of the target country, a third the head of the largest labor union. Students much research the problem, the interests of their character, the interests and likely responses of others. Eva has a speaking mentor to work with students in the development of this project, but it could be done without one. Students prepare their briefs, the presentation of them, and the debate among them, all at the Speaking Center. The format makes it possible for students to understand the relationships among issues to a depth that would not be likely in a more traditional format.

4. Try "pre-discussing" important topics or themes. □ In one interesting study, before any material on osmosis was presented, some students talked for ten minutes exploring guesses about how it might work. Those students had a much better understanding than the control group when tested several months after the same class and lab material had been given both groups. This sort of "pre-activation" would seem to have broad applicability. It would seem to work best in contexts in which nobody in the group already understands the issue, but all are struggling on an equal footing.

5. Conduct role-linked discussions. □ Along with the reading assignment that will provide the basis for discussion, hand out descriptions of "roles". These roles could be organizational positions (chair of the International Monetary Fund, President of the Labor Union, etc.; ecologist, lumberjack, president of the lumbering company, stockholder, town citizen, etc.). Alternately they might be argument positions (supports abortion on demand for any reason, supports abortion in the first trimester, links abortion to viability, opposes abortion except to save the mother's life, etc.) or even actual people (Al Gore, Eleanor Smeal, Pat Buchanan, Donna Shalala, etc.). At the start of class, deal roles from a deck of

cards, requiring that each student conduct the discussion from the point of view of that role.

6. Organize debates in class. □ Break the class into smaller groups and assign them debate topics and positions. Maybe they should research positions outside of the syllabus; or the positions might be tied to material that you are already working with. At any rate, the debate format will bring them not only to see the issues and to focus on the reasons and evidence for positions that one might take, but will also give them more of a stake in the issues. The speaking center can provide information on formats, and may even be able to set up a demonstration debate.

7. Spend some time teaching students how to have productive discussions. □ Student discussion is an important aspect of most classes, but often discussion gets caught between the Scylla of rambling and the Charybdis of stalling. Think about spending some time teaching students how to have a productive discussion. Intervene to insist that remarks be responsive to what has preceded, that they give evidence and argument rather than just sharing their feelings, and that they move the discussion forward. As students get the idea, you may find yourself intervening less, and discussion becoming a much better use of class time. (See also #10.)

8. Stage re-creations or dramas. □ Students might be required to appear "in character" in a literature, history, or psychology course. In some cases this might venture toward a staged debate if they will also need to argue a specific position. (Joe Ellis organized his entire Great Debates in American History course around this idea, with impressive results.) In other cases dramatic elements might be emphasized. Their "roles" might be tied to specific people, to class position, to occupation or political interest, or constrained in other ways. (See #3, #9.)

9. Conduct a symposium. □ Students can put on a symposium around a central concern of the course. Rachel Fink uses this as the culminating project for her embryology course. Students research their own topics (each one develops an expertise in a sub-area), prepare abstracts that are published in a program, and a formal presentation that is delivered at the symposium. They also turn in a paper, which is appropriately different from the oral presentation. Rachel brings her students into the speaking center to get them organized, and they work extensively there to prepare their presentations. Last year, she ran the symposium jointly with a course being taught at Smith and reported that our students both learned enormously and were notably impressive.

10. Conduct a trial. □ This might work best in a small class. Last semester, John Fox had students conduct a trial in an early income tax case. The format could be applied to almost any field, from biology to French. With teams of attorneys, a judge, witnesses (both expert and others), a jury, just to mention the most prominent, there is wide leeway for bring students into sharp engagement with issues. In John's case, he served as the judge, though in other situations a student could take that role, too. You might even assign trial roles on a competitive basis.

11. Constrain discussion and questions in ways that will move the material forward. □ You might prohibit students' reporting on how they feel, insisting that they say what they think, and then that they give reasons or evidence supporting their views. You might require some students to comment only from a specific point of view. You might introduce a requirement that after any conclusion is drawn,

the class linger briefly to identify the premises (including those not articulated) and whether the conclusion actually follows from them. Once you start thinking along these lines, you will think of other ways that you can introduce constraints on the structure of questions, comments and discussion, that will help you move forward, and that will enhance their learning.

12. Create local experts, either with customized reading assignments, or directly. □ We tend to take it as axiomatic that reading assignments are the same across a class, but by disrupting this assumption you can give students material that they "own." Put together lots of readings on a topic, preferably from different, even incompatible, points of view. Give each reading to only a small subgroup (perhaps even only one student) of the class. You may or may not tell them who they are--i.e., who else has the same reading. Then in class discussion they will have to bring the perspective of their material into engagement with other perspectives that they haven't yet seen. □ □ Alternately, you can create a system of local experts. Each student is given an area that she will be expected to acquire expertise in during the semester. She may have to research it, develop it in some way, be on intimate terms with it. She may have to do a project on it (e.g., a term paper or presentation), or she may simply have to develop expertise. Other students, and you, will then turn to her during the semester when her expertise is needed to move a topic forward. This can be used productively in almost any area. In an embryology course, each student might be given an embryo (frog, bird, ...); in an art history course each student could be given a period or a style or an artist. In a statistics course, each student could have a test that she knows inside and out -- its strengths and its seamy underbelly. In calculus, each student could be responsible for knowing inside-out integration techniques for a class of functions. Each student in a history of philosophy course could be responsible as expert for a particular aspect of a philosopher's theory. □ □ The great advantage of this method is that not only do students take responsibility for knowing one thing intimately, but they then learn how to bring their areas of strength (and weakness!) into constructive dialogue. □ □ A few final notes: □ □ (a) If you are going to have students prepare class presentations, it will be helpful to give them some preparation on how to do this, and to encourage them to prepare oral drafts and revisions in a way analogous to what they do for written work. The speaking center is available for students who are preparing oral work. In addition, it is important to give more comprehensive feedback on presentations than a muttered "good job" afterward. We will be holding workshops and developing materials that will help in the tricky process of evaluating and giving feedback on oral work. □ □ (b) It takes time to develop and deliver oral work, so much so that it is easy to get disheartened over loss of class time. But much of the work can be done outside of class. Especially if you organize your class into small groups that are charged to work collaboratively developing projects, they will make a lot of the "hands on" effort on their own. (This is another reason to explore alternatives to the single-student presentation: to take advantage of the energy and critical feedback that is generated in a collaborative setting.)

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Speaking, Arguing, & Writing Program □ Mount Holyoke College □ 50 College Street □ South Hadley, MA 01075-6427 □ tel: 413-538-3428 | fax: 413-538-2912 □ Email: [Michelle Deal](mailto:Michelle.Deal@mount-holyoke.edu), SAW Coordinator