

Developing Public Speaking Skills in Undergraduates: A Two-Day Event

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Introduction

Public Speaking for First-Year Historians was an initiative which ran for the first time in June 2016 in the Department of History at Royal Holloway, University of London. The 2-day event was proposed and designed by 2 postgraduate research students who wanted to address the lack of formal training for presentations in history degree programmes. In particular, a key aim of the event was to engage students in skills and techniques for oral communication, especially practical exercises that could be implemented throughout their studies. The first day of the event consisted of 1 lecture and 2 hour-long workshops in small groups of less than 20. On the second day, each student gave a presentation to 2 tutors and a small audience of peers. Students were given an indicative grade boundary (such as low 2:1 or high 2:2), but were not given a precise mark, nor were the results formally recorded or weighted in their degree programme. The event was not compulsory, but it was strongly supported by the department and all first-year students were encouraged to attend. 148 students on single-honours or joint-honours history programmes attended the first day of the event and 97 returned on the second day and completed the course.

Student engagement is analysed in reference to this specific event. In outlining the aims of the initiative and the methods used to deliver the training, this article evaluates the success of student engagement strategies and analyses its potential for future development. 'Student engagement' is, of course, a term that has received much scrutiny; it has been recognised that student engagement is a multidimensional construct, including behavioural, emotional and cognitive elements (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Thus, in defining student engagement in this context, we include a range of criteria, including evidence of active participation, recognition by the students the importance of public speaking as a future skill, and continued practice of the exercises following the end of the event. It is acknowledged at the outset, however, that these criteria are challenging to measure.

Aims and Methods

A principal aim of the course was to engage students in training taken from outside the immediate remit of a history programme, by utilising techniques from the performing arts. The exercises included vocal warm ups, breathing to reduce nerves and projection exercises using the diaphragm. The workshops were centred on participatory and collaborative

activities, ensuring that practical exercises could be mastered as a group, but could be replicated by the students alone. After practising these in their workshop groups, the students could use the accompanying hand-outs as aide-memoirs when practising alone. This was a targeted attempt to promote continued student engagement after the event, so that students could repeat the exercises throughout their degree programme and beyond.

Success of the event relied on training the workshop tutors in the necessary performing arts techniques. All of the workshop tutors were postgraduate researchers or early career researchers based in the department. Each was an experienced teacher and public speaker, but most did not have any formal training in the performing arts. Subsequently, all tutors were trained in performing arts techniques by one of the course creators, who is an experienced musical theatre performer. The importance of formal training in oral communication for teachers has been acknowledged in the case of American universities.

we face a possible future in which teachers with little to no preparation or aptitude for teaching speech, from disciplines such as History, Philosophy, and Writing Studies, are increasingly given the privilege and responsibility of teaching students their most important oral communication skills (Gehrke, 2016, p. 111).

The success of the event relied not just on student engagement but on tutor engagement; the tutors themselves had to learn new skills and cognitively engage in their value before they could teach the undergraduates.

The main challenge in teaching public speaking is undoubtedly the common anxiety that it tends to provoke. This is also, however, why training in public speaking is so important. The content and ethos of the workshops were intended to normalise public speaking anxiety, and to introduce practical techniques that could be implemented for short-term and long-term use. These included an explanation of the bodily “fight-or-flight” response to anxiety, and breathing exercises that could be performed to calm nerves to reduce physiological reactions to stress. Students were shown how to practise presentations to incrementally increase confidence levels, by identifying their comfort level (for instance, practising a presentation alone with no audience) and gradually moving beyond this (i.e. initially practising to a 1-person audience, then 2, etc.). This too was intended to encourage continued practice of the techniques learnt in the workshops for later in their degree programme.

In an effort to minimise the intense anxiety that public speaking can provoke, the event aimed to maintain a low-key, relaxed atmosphere. The tutors began the first workshop by acknowledging that public speaking is difficult and most people have bad experiences. To keep the tone light, tutors also shared their own amusing horror stories of presentation failures, and encouraged the students to do the same. At the lecture, the Head of Department provided a video clip of an outtake of a television programme in which he falls into a large hole in the ground whilst presenting. From the very beginning of the event, efforts were made to make a comfortable and non-judgmental environment. In turn, this facilitated positive trust relationships between students and tutors.

A rapport between students and tutors was critical to the positive feedback culture which was created. In particular, this was informed by the principles of Assessment for Learning. Rather than seeing their presentation as an evaluation of their current abilities, the students were encouraged to see the feedback as part of the learning process for future development. The students were given feedback by 3 methods: written, oral and peer. Two tutors provided written feedback, which had the mark scheme broken down into a grid, with additional comments added to the bottom. By only giving students an indicative grade boundary, feedback was focussed on qualitative advice on improvement rather than a quantitative value.

This was supplemented with oral feedback provided immediately after the presentation, which was given to the student in front of the rest of the student audience, ensuring each student learnt from each other's feedback. Finally, every student gave feedback to each other, by filling in a simplified grid (Fig. 1).

	1	2:1	2:2	3	F
Structure					
Content					
Delivery and Performance					
Timing					
Resources					

Fig. 1: Simplified grid of the mark scheme

The intention was to provide students with the maximum amount of feedback possible. Furthermore, by having students assess each other, it was hoped they would maintain their attention throughout the other students' presentations, and develop their own analytical skills in recognising effective public speaking.

Results

At the beginning of the first lecture, each student was asked to complete a preliminary questionnaire about what they would like to gain from the course, and their previous experience with public speaking. The questionnaire asked students to rate their level of confidence at giving a presentation, on a scale from 1 to 10 (1= no confidence, 10= completely confident). The mean average result was 5.7, with over 60% of students giving a score of 6 or less. Only 4 students reported perfect confidence. Whilst the mode average was 8, there was a correlation between the higher scores and previous experience with public speaking or other forms of performance.

97 students gave a presentation on the second day, of which 80 completed a feedback questionnaire which asked them to re-assess their confidence levels. The mean average

confidence level rose from 5.7 at the beginning of the task to 7.0 at the end. As attendance levels dropped from 148 to 97, and not everyone completed a questionnaire, a direct comparison of the average result is problematic.

Nevertheless, the qualitative feedback given by students indicated a rise in confidence levels and an appreciation of the emphasis on improving nerves, at the very least on an individual level. One student rated her confidence level as 7, “much higher than yesterday”, thanking the tutors for building up her confidence. Others highlighted the emphasis on nerve management as particularly useful. One such student commented, “It was very effective to learn about different techniques to deal with nerves”. The immersive experience of doing the workshops and presentations together in groups was also deemed a success; one student described in their feedback that they *felt more comfortable that more than one person did the presentation on the same day*.

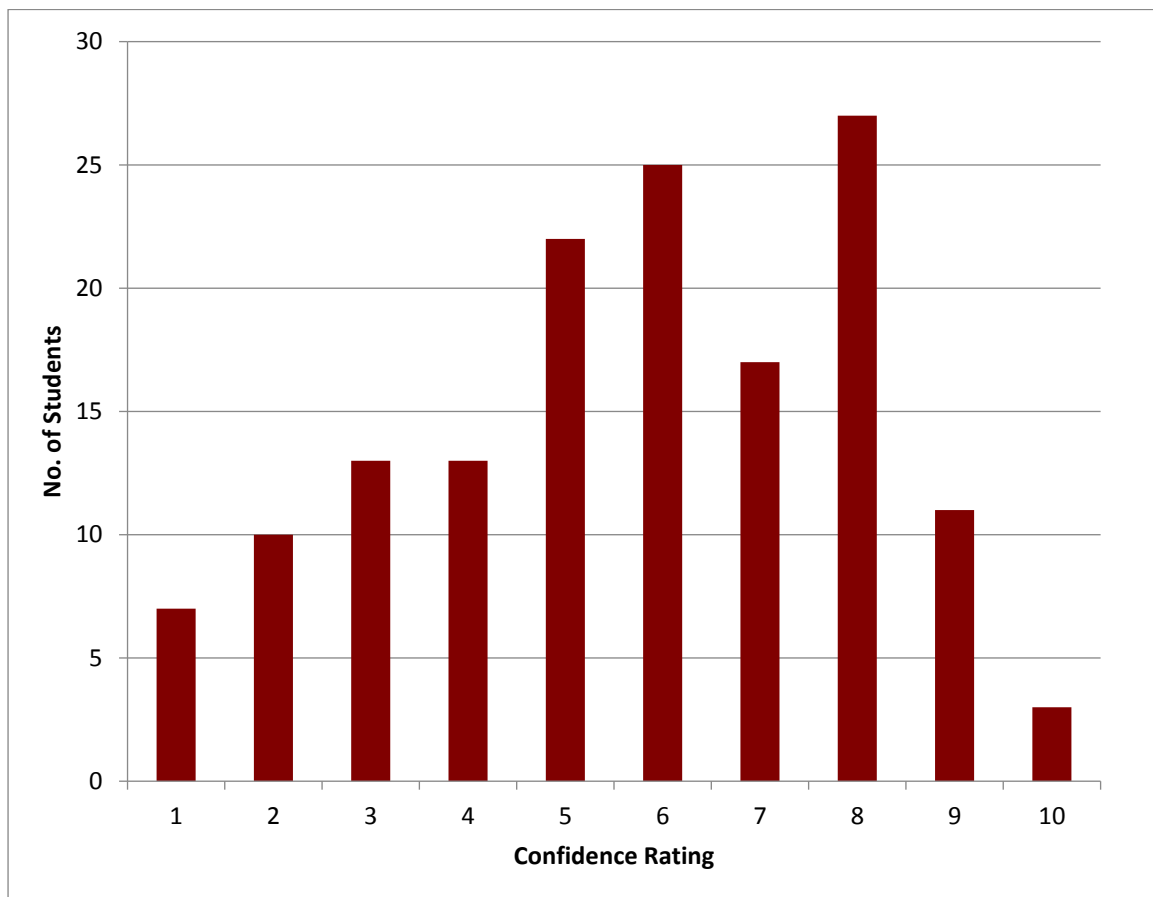


Fig. 2: Graph showing the confidence rating of the students at the beginning of the event

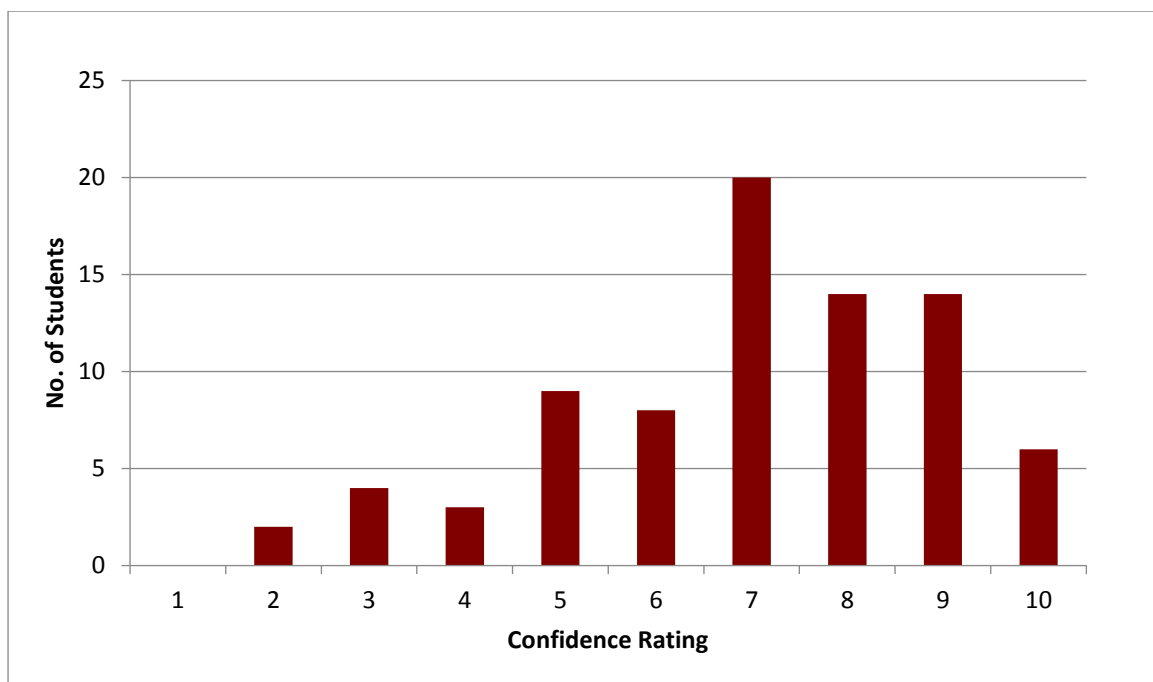


Fig. 3: Graph showing the confidence rating of the students at the end of the event

The practical exercises were praised in the student feedback, and there was evidence that some students had applied them in preparation for their presentation. For instance, one student stated they had used the techniques for calming nerves before their presentation; another described practising their presentation out-loud the night before, which they had previously never done. Students also drew attention to the particular exercises they found useful, such as warm ups, which they never would have learnt in a traditional history programme without public speaking training.

Overall, the feedback provided by the students that completed the course showed a positive reaction to the content covered in the workshops and suggested they would be implementing the exercises in the future. From feedback taken at this early stage, certainly the *intention* to continue practising the techniques was present. How far students actually have continued to use the techniques is a different matter. In this respect, this early feedback might be seen as an emotional and cognitive engagement with the event, by professing their intent to continue. Long-term behavioural engagement is, of course, more difficult to continuously measure.

The emphasis on feedback also emerged strongly from the qualitative feedback as a strength of the event. Overwhelmingly the students, some of who pointed out that feedback on presentations is less frequently given than essays, gratefully received their feedback. The relaxed, low-key atmosphere maintained by the tutors was attributed as having helped the feedback process. One tutor was described as:

*really great, enthusiastic, encouraging, made me feel more confident in myself.
Constructive feedback for improvement in friendly way.*

Another student complimented the attitude of the tutors:

I like how you guys seemed genuinely interested in trying to get students to get over their fear of public speaking.

In addition, peer review was noted as being useful for the speaker and the reviewers. One student commented that:

watching the other presentations allowed us to experience a variety of styles and weigh up the pros and cons of each.

The reliance on qualitative feedback makes it difficult to draw generalisations from individual student comments about specific elements of the training. It can be asserted, however, that for at least some students the intended cognitive engagement with, for instance, the peer review process, was achieved. Whilst less students referred to specific parts of the feedback process, the emphasis on feedback and continual development was highlighted by the students.

The design and implementation of this course also stimulated an effective partnership between the postgraduate tutors and the rest of the history department. The two postgraduates who initially suggested the course were given a rare opportunity to gain experience in course design and leadership. The tutors who were previously inexperienced in the performing arts were given training that would enrich their teaching skills, and critically reflect upon their own public speaking. According to one workshop tutor:

It made me view my own teaching as a type of performance in a way I hadn't really considered before. Teaching students to be dynamic, interesting speakers made me consider ways in which I could be an even more dynamic, interesting teacher.

The tutors' training in performing arts thus had the dual consequences of both preparing them for the event, and expanding their skill set as teachers.

Reflections

Although 97 students completing the course was considered successful, it was 65.5% of those who attended the first day of the event, and 40% of all students to whom the event was available. In their initial questionnaires, some students expressed reluctance at having to take part, either because they felt they did not need training, or because they were significantly anxious. However, the major reason for non-attendance seems to be the timing of the event, which was the last week of term. To quote one student:

*I feel the event would have been better attended if it wasn't so close to the end of term!
Everyone is going out/having fun so many people I know didn't turn up for that reason!*

Despite the occasional gripes about the timing of the course, students who completed the course almost universally described its value. Numerous comments advocated the course and making it compulsory for future generations of students; one student even suggested that students that took part this year should help promote the event to the next year's students. Thus, despite the challenges of attracting students to a non-compulsory event, those who completed the course were practically unanimous in their praise of its benefits.

Organisational and administrative changes could potentially elevate levels of student participation, and thus behavioural engagement. Moving the event to the beginning of the year would stimulate higher attendance and prepare students for their presentations in the first year. As this event emphasised long-term development of public-speaking skills, where practicalities allow it seems only logical that it would be better delivered over an extended period. This would give students more time to master techniques and allow their confidence to build.

Since the event, efforts have been made to continue to collect feedback from the students and the tutors. Six months after the event, one student commented on the long-term benefits of the course for improving her confidence and performance for seminar presentations.

I found the public speaking course a lot of fun and it really boosted my confidence. I enjoyed the vocal warm ups and now whenever I'm nervous I just follow the breathing exercises we were taught and calm down.

Evidently, there are issues of representativeness taken from individual students. By having a standalone event, the opportunities for a long-term monitoring of its results is more problematic; continually collating feedback from students *en masse* after the event is practically difficult to organise. Similarly, the event could also incorporate a more sophisticated method of obtaining quantifiable data on student confidence. The statistical ratings taken before and after the event do give some indication of confidence levels, but the numbering system was simplified and somewhat subjective. In future, more complex models of measuring public speaking anxiety could be implemented, such as the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (McCroskey, 1970) or the more recent Public Speaking Anxiety Scale (Bartholomay & Houlihan, 2016). Using complex models of measurement could provide more inclusive data, and allow for a deeper analysis of the particular successes of the event.

Conclusion

Public Speaking for Historians will be adapted and evolved in light of the outcomes from its inaugural run. The students offered a number of useful suggestions for content that could be included in future events. These included content on structuring a talk, memory, body

language and PowerPoint. Activities and exercises to facilitate these new suggestions will be developed, maintaining an emphasis on participatory and collaborative workshops, and the principles of assessment for learning. Where practically possible, the timing of the event and its place within the degree will be reconsidered. As the students move through their degree programme, their results in assessed presentations will be monitored, particularly in comparison to earlier year groups, and their peers who did not complete the course.

Whilst this initiative is still in its infancy, it has demonstrated the value of teaching practical exercises in enhancing student engagement for public speaking. The training in performing arts and nerve management techniques has had innumerable benefits for students and staff alike, and both groups have gained knowledge and skills that can be continually developed. It has proven the importance of interdisciplinarity in teaching and learning, and engaging undergraduates with a skill set that is taken from outside the traditional limits of their academic discipline.

Related publications and resources

Bartholomay, E. M., & Houlihan, D. D. (2016). Public Speaking Anxiety Scale: Preliminary Psychometric Data and Scale Validation. *Personality and Individual Differences, 94*, 211-215.

Ferreira Marinho, A. C., Mesquita de Medeiros, A., Côrtes Gama, A. C., & Caldas Teixeira, L. (2016). Fear of Public Speaking: Perception of College Students and Correlates. *Journal of Voice*.

Fredericks, Jennifer A., Blumefeld, Phyllis C., & Paris, Alison H. (2004). School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 74*, 59-109.

Gehrke, P. J. (2016). Introduction to Special Issue on Teaching First-Year Communication Courses. *Review of Communication, 16*, 109-113.

McCroskey, J. C. (1970). Measures of Communication-Bound Anxiety. *Speech Monographs, XXXVII*, 269-277.

¹ Scores were rounded to one where students gave a negative number or zero