Reflection to Promote Development of Presentation Skills in a Technical Communication Course (Work in Progress)

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Introduction

In this Classroom Application, we document our implementation of reflection to help students gain confidence and improve their presentation skills in an Introduction to Technical Communication course. In this initial study, we aim to: (1) provide a set of curricular materials that engineering educators can use to integrate reflection in any presentation assignment and (2) discuss self-reported student data regarding development of presentation skills. Students reported that viewing their recorded presentation and reflecting on their performance helped them gain confidence and improve their presentation skills for future use.

Although effective communication skills are required for success in all engineering disciplines, many programs do not teach technical communication for a variety of reasons, including lack of instructor experience or buy-in regarding the value of teaching professional skills. And although some students recognize that effective communication skills are required for professional success, we observe that most engineering students enter our Introduction to Technical Communication course with little understanding -- but a strong negative impression -- of technical communication. Many students think of technical communication as a “soft skill” rather than a technical or professional skill.

Here, we describe our experience using short written reflection assignments to scaffold a major presentation assignment in an Introduction to Technical Communication course that is required by most majors in the College of Engineering at the University of Washington. Our aim is to make teaching presentation skills more manageable for engineering educators by providing a transferable, easy-to-implement reflection activity that can be implemented in any engineering course that includes a presentation assignment.

Reflection to Enhance Learning and Assessment

Reflection as a teaching approach is becoming increasingly recognized in engineering education [1, 2], where it is often used to promote cognitive development and can help students learn more from projects, internships, and other educational experiences [3-7]. For example, a common in-class reflective activity is the “exam wrapper”: shortly after an exam, students articulate what they did that helped them do well on the exam and what they could do differently to improve their performance on a future exam.

Recently, reflection has been used to assess student learning in a variety of engineering contexts [8-9]. Reflection has been studied as an approach to help students identify the value of their learning about writing and the transferability of writing skills beyond the classroom [10]. For a review of student knowledge gains associated with reflection, see [11].

In this work, our teaching innovation is using reflection to promote the development of presentation skills. We ask each student to reflect after getting audience feedback or watching a recording of their presentation, which has the added benefits of (1) allowing the student to see evaluate their performance from the audience’s perspective, and (2) providing students with an

additional layer of quick, targeted feedback. The recording and viewing aspect of these reflection activities are novel approaches for the author, who has previously published course activities involving reflection to develop leadership competencies, promote engagement in student service projects, and enhance benefits of peer review of capstone reports [12-14]. The author and colleagues described initial efforts to enhance student presentation skills with reflection in [15].

Course Overview: Introduction to Technical Communication

In this paper, we describe our initial study involving two sections (60 students total) of an Introduction to Technical Communication course that is required by most majors in the College of Engineering at the University of Washington that enrolls over 900 engineering undergraduate students per year. (See details in abbreviated syllabus in Appendix A.)

The course learning objectives include:

1. Implement successful communication strategies based on a document's or presentation's audience, purpose, and context.
2. Integrate text and visuals to convey complex, technical information.
3. Revise documents for content, organization, and writing style.
4. Use library research skills and knowledge of citation practices, conduct self-directed inquiry to identify, critically evaluate, and cite relevant literature.
5. Provide feedback to others on their writing, speaking, and teamwork abilities.
6. Demonstrate ability to work in teams and manage team projects.
7. Design and deliver effective oral presentations.
8. Understand ethics and sustainability in engineering.

The following ABET outcomes #4, 5, and 7 are especially relevant to our course [16]. Please see Appendix A for description of implementation and assessment of the following ABET outcomes:

1. ABET Outcome 4: An ability to communicate effectively with a range of audiences.
2. ABET Outcome 5: An ability to recognize ethical and professional responsibilities in engineering situations and make informed judgments, which must consider the impact of engineering solutions in global, economic, environmental, and societal contexts.
3. ABET Outcome 7: An ability to recognize the ongoing need to acquire new knowledge, to choose appropriate learning strategies, and to apply this knowledge.

Introduction to Technical Communication includes four main assignments, including the Elevator Pitch and Ethics Presentation discussed in this paper. In addition, students are evaluated in five written journal reflections (including the two reflections discussed in this paper) and course participation. Course assignments are weighted as follows in the final course grade:

Student Self-Perception of Technical Communication Skills

In the first journal reflection of the course, we ask students to discuss what they want to get from the class. One student reported that "this class is basically a nightmare for me." Many students identify themselves as good or poor writers, which implies that students believe that communication skills are inherent (i.e., cannot be improved). Moreover, limiting their consideration to only writing also ignores the other genres of technical communication.

Our current work is in direct response to student feedback (Fig. 1). In particular, we have noted that many engineering students report high anxiety about presentations. From our own experience, we have identified typical problems that students experience with presentations:

1. Students do not have effective tools to practice presentations. Students often focus on the number of times they practice, whether they are within a time limit, and memorizing their presentation word-for-word. Students want more opportunities to work on adapting to their audience, organization, and transitions (also see Table II).
2. Students typically do not get an opportunity to evaluate their own presentation skills.
3. Students usually receive feedback only *after* giving their presentation, when it is too late to affect their performance. In other words, students often receive only summative instructor feedback, rather than formative assessment.

We developed a multi-step “Rehearse → Reflect → Present → Reflect” process (Fig. 1) in an effort to provide students with (1) effective tools to improve their oral presentation skills, namely reflection at post-rehearsal and post-performance; (2) opportunities to evaluate their own presentation skills by recording their presentation in a low-stakes manner that ensures privacy; and (3) formative assessment of their presentation skills in a low-stakes environment and articulation of how they will use the presentation skills they learned in this assignment in the future.

Scaffolding Presentation with Reflection

Two assignments in the Introduction to Technical Communication course require individual presentations: (1) Elevator Pitch (worth 4% of final course grade, low-stakes grading on credit/no credit basis); and (2) Ethics Presentation (worth 20% of final course grade, high-stakes individual presentation graded according to rubric).

For the Elevator Pitch (low-stakes assignment), we ask students to view a recording of their in-class performance and write a short reflection, in which they identify something they learned from this low-stakes experience of speaking in front of the class.

Later in the course, we scaffold the Ethics Presentation (high-stakes assignment) with a multi-part “Rehearse → Reflect → Present → Reflect” method:

1. **Rehearse.** Students rehearse and record their presentation in a low-stakes environment. Students may record themselves practicing the presentation and/or do their presentation in front of someone who provides feedback.
2. **Reflect.** Students reflect on their recorded rehearsal to prepare for their in-class performance. Reflection prompts in the assignment ask the student to identify both positive and negative aspects of their rehearsal and to comment on whether they are incorporating something from their earlier, low-stakes assignment (elevator pitch).
3. **Present.** Students give their in-class presentation, which is recorded, and then reflect on how their rehearsal and post-rehearsal reflection affected their in-class performance.
4. **Reflect.** Students are asked to view the recording of their in-class presentation and reflect on how their performance was influenced by their post-rehearsal. Finally, we ask students to identify how this experience will influence their approach for future presentations.

Table I. Prompts for Post-Rehearsal and Post-Performance Reflections (with list of tables showing representative responses from student reflections)	
Post-Rehearsal Reflection Prompt: Please submit this reflection before the start of class on the day you give your presentation. Practice and record your presentation in front of an audience of your choice and then reflect on the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. What did you see that you did well?b. What do you need to work on?c. Did you learn something about presenting from your Elevator Pitch (assignment earlier in quarter) that you're using now for your Ethics Presentation?	Student responses shown in: Table IIa Table IIb Table IIc
Post-Performance Reflection Prompt: Please submit this reflection by the next class day <u>after</u> your in-class presentation. <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. How did reflecting on your rehearsal (previous assignment) help or hinder you?b. Consider your experience giving the Ethics Presentation in class, and then reflect on the following: What will you try to do differently next time you do a presentation? What will you do the same way the next time?c. What was your favorite and least favorite part of the Ethics Presentation?	Student responses: Table IIIa Table IIIb Table IIIc

Assessment

Instructor observations and student work indicate that the “Rehearse → Reflect → Present → Reflect” method is valuable to students. In the post-rehearsal reflection, students reported that they felt more prepared for their in-class performance after reflecting on their low-stakes rehearsal (Tables IIa-c). In the post-performance reflection, students indicated that reflecting on their rehearsal positively impacted their in-class performance (Tables IIIa-c). See Table I for an overview of reflection prompts and corresponding tables showing representative responses from student reflections.

Virtually all students felt that rehearsing their presentation was helpful, and many students mentioned that they saw improvement as they practiced their presentation (Table IIa). As the instructor, this was validating and we used this data to establish student buy-in. Many students initially resisted being required to record their rehearsal, and some students admitted after-the-fact that they completed the reflection without recording their rehearsal.

Table IIa. Post-Rehearsal Reflection: Excerpts from student work.	
Summary of prompt	Student responses
What did you do well?	<i>“I did well on moving through the presentation even when I mess[ed] up.”</i>
	<i>“I recorded myself twice doing the presentation and the second time I recorded it was so much better. So I think that shows how much I improve after practicing even just a little bit. ”</i>
	<i>“I spoke at a consistent speed and changed my tone when I wanted to emphasize something.”</i>
	<i>“[I was able to] sound like I knew what I was talking about.”</i>
	<i>“I didn’t excessively move or use my hands too much.”</i>
	<i>“As I practiced more, I noticed that my transitions from slides went from very blocky and unprepared to fairly smooth.”</i>
	<i>“I rehearsed a LOT and I think that helped.”</i>

Students identified several types of things they were doing well. Many students provided qualitative observations, such as maintaining flow through small errors or improvements in smoothness of transitions between slides (Table IIa).

Students identified fewer types of things they needed to work on compared to the things they were doing well (Table IIb). Most students commented on quantitative observations such as the number of hand gestures or going over the time limit. rather than qualitative observations.

Table IIb. Post-Rehearsal Reflection: Excerpts from student work.	
Summary of prompt	Student responses
What do you need to work on?	<i>"I definitely learned that I needed to rehearse without notes. It was a lot easier to speak naturally and engage with the audience when I didn't have a sheet of paper in front of me."</i>
	<i>"I was scrambling to finish the presentation [on time]."</i>
	<i>"... provide enough context for my audience to understand my issue as if they have never heard of this ethical dilemma before."</i>
	<i>"I need to work on keeping my eyes up toward the class instead of on my slides or on my notes."</i>
	<i>"[Watching my rehearsal was] pretty uncomfortable at first. However, because the video is private, it is actually not that bad to watch it. And from that video, I can clearly see where I need to improve."</i>

Many students commented on how something they learned from the previous presentation assignment, the elevator pitch, was helpful to them in the Ethics Presentation (Table IIc). It was rewarding to see students make this connection between the two assignments involving presentation skills. Many students stated that the elevator pitch assignment taught them very concrete lessons, such as the challenges of remaining within the time limit and improvising in front of an audience.

Table IIc. Post-Rehearsal Reflection: Excerpts from student work.	
Summary of prompt	Student responses
Did you learn something from your Elevator Pitch (previous assignment) that you're using now for your Ethics Presentation?	<i>"I was talking too fast during my elevator pitch, so I'm making an effort to slow down and focus... instead of [just] trying to get through it."</i>
	<i>"[In] my elevator pitch I had a difficult time with [improvisation] when I was standing in front of the class [so I wanted] to be more prepared and structured for this presentation."</i>
	<i>"In the elevator pitch I learned a lot about how to engage my audience."</i>
	<i>"I learned from my elevator pitch that there is no point in being nervous."</i>
	<i>"I know that in my pitch I jumbled words by speaking frantically out of nervousness... because I was merely focused on getting the words out."</i>
	<i>"From my elevator pitch [I learned] that humor does a really good job of pulling in the audience's attention."</i>

Many students stated that the elevator pitch assignment taught them very concrete lessons, such as the challenges of finishing within the time limit and to improvising in front of an audience (Table IIc). In addition, students commented on qualitative improvements, such as engaging the audience and “there is no point in being nervous.”

In order to complete the Post-Performance Reflection, we asked students to record their in-class presentations. Similar to the pushback the students gave for recording their rehearsals, initially students were resistant to recording their in-class presentations. However, after we established protections for student privacy and after the protocol was set in place on the first day of in-class presentations, all students chose to record their in-class presentations.

As a class, we established the following norms so that students would be comfortable with recording their in-class presentations:

1. If recording would make the student anxious to the point that the student believed it would negatively impact their grade, students did not have to record their in-class performance.
2. Students recorded their presentation on their own phone and did not submit it to the instructor, so there was no risk of the recording being viewed by the instructor or leaking into cyberspace.
3. Students viewed their recording on the honor system.

Table IIIa. Post-Performance Reflection: Excerpts from student work.	
Summary of prompt	Student responses
For your Ethics Presentation: How did reflecting on your rehearsal (previous assignment) help or hinder you?	<i>“Writing the previous reflection was definitely helpful for me. If it [weren't] for that reflection, I probably would not have actually practiced my presentation.”</i>
	<i>“[The previous reflection] definitely helped me for my [in-class] presentation... overall, I did feel a lot more composed and comfortable with my presentation as a whole. It also allowed to me to experiment with different renditions of my presentation to find my favorite one.”</i>
	<i>“...it forced me to take a step back and consider how my presentation style helped or detracted from my message. From this reflection I was more [aware] of pacing and overall body language in my actual presentation.”</i>
	<i>“I realized I sounded too scripted and I tried to make it more conversational when presenting [in class].”</i>

In their Post-Performance reflections (Table IIIa), students stated that writing the previous reflection (post-rehearsal) was helpful because it encouraged the students to practice and also provided guidance for improvements to be made for their in-class performance, such as adapting

to the audience. We were surprised to read several students admissions that the Post-Rehearsal reflection was the only reason that they practiced their Ethics Presentation at all.

Table IIIb. Post-Performance Reflection: Excerpts from student work	
Summary of prompt	Student responses
As a result of your Ethics Presentation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What will you try to do differently next time you do a presentation? • What will you do the same way the next time? 	<i>“The next time I have a presentation, I probably will avoid having a slide that has a significant amount of dense text, because it seemed immediately off-putting to the audience and it was flustering to try and convey all that information in the moment when I was presenting.”</i>
	<i>“...the next time I give a presentation I will put more energy into making the content of my presentation approachable and easy to understand.”</i>
	<i>“I really liked how I sounded during my presentation, so for future presentations, I want to continue sounding genuine and authentic. I feel [I was] relatable to the audience and engaged them.”</i>
	<i>“One thing that I would like to do the same way next time I present is have a very clean and rehearsed speech and also using questions and engaging content such as relating my... personal experience.”</i>

Student comments on changes they will make to future presentations due to their experience with the Ethics Presentation were quite variable (Table IIIb). Regarding what they would do differently next time they present, students responded that they would change their slide design, such as using less text, or presentation content, such as using a more approachable framework or using less technical jargon.

Regarding what they would do the same in future presentations, student responses were generally about preparation and their presentation delivery (Table IIIb). For example, one student responded that they would like to do have a “clean and rehearsed” presentation again, and also use strategies to engage the audience such as posing questions to the audience and sharing their personal experiences.

In the Post-Rehearsal reflections, we were pleased to read that student responses regarding their favorite and least favorite aspects of the Ethics Presentation assignment were overwhelmingly positive about their overall experience (Table IIIc).

Many students responded that their favorite part of the presentation was the feeling of accomplishment after delivering their presentation in class. Students stated that they “feel proud” and “feel improvement” in their skills. One student stated that the assignment was a “breakthrough” that made them feel like they were finally “brave enough to talk in front of that many people in my second language.”

Interestingly, many students did not mention a least favorite aspect of the presentation. The most common student response for the least favorite aspect of the presentation was the 5-minute time limit.

Table IIIc. Post-Rehearsal Reflection: Excerpts from student work.	
Summary of prompt	Student responses
What was your favorite and least favorite part of the Ethics Presentation?	<i>“...it was incredibly helpful to have the recording of the actual presentation so that I can go back and analyze how I hold myself in front of an audience, how my actions looked, and also how my vocal delivery sounded.”</i>
	<i>“I feel proud of myself and I can owe that to this assignment.”</i>
	<i>“My favorite part of the presentation is that I finally made a breakthrough... [before] I was not brave enough to talk in front of that many people in my second language.”</i>
	<i>“I feel the improvement in my presentation skills.”</i>
	<i>“5 minutes is too short”</i>

In summary, students reported that viewing their recorded in-class presentation and completing the Post-Performance reflection was beneficial for developing presentation skills for future use (Tables II and III). Student comments involved topics such as motivation to practice, slide layout, content, design, and delivery.

Conclusion

In this Classroom Application, we implemented multi-part reflection to help students develop presentation skills in a technical communication course. Our “Rehearse → Reflect → Present → Reflect” process uses low-stakes rehearsal and reflection to scaffold a high-stakes presentation assignment (Fig. 1 and overview of reflection prompts in Table I).

Overall, in their Post-Rehearsal reflection students stated that the elevator pitch assignment taught them very concrete lessons that were useful in the Ethics Presentation (Table II). Surprisingly, many students stated that the Post-Rehearsal reflection was the only reason that they practiced their Ethics Presentation at all.

In the Post-Performance reflections, student responses regarding what they would do the same in future presentations were generally about preparation and presentation delivery (Table III). Most students were overwhelmingly positive about their overall experience involving rehearsal and reflection. Many students reported a feeling of accomplishment, pride, or bravery due to their gains in presentation skills after delivering their presentation in class.

Finally, our approach is transferable to any course that includes student presentations. As our initial results are so positive, we provide detailed prompts so that our “Rehearse → Reflect → Present → Reflect” process may serve as a model for other engineering educators.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A. Syllabus for Introduction to Technical Communication

Instructor: Dianne Hendricks, PhD

Required textbook: M. Markel, *Practical Strategies for Technical Communication, Second Edition*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016.

Canvas Course Website: <https://canvas.uw.edu/courses/>

Course Description: This course introduces engineering undergraduates to the fundamental technical communication processes associated with writing, communication design, and oral presentations. Assignments focus on contemporary issues in engineering with a focus on ethics and sustainable engineering practices.

Learning Objectives: Upon completion of this course, you will be able to:

1. Implement successful communication strategies based on a document's or presentation's **audience, purpose, and context**.
2. Integrate text and visuals to convey complex, technical information.
3. Revise documents for content, organization, and writing style.
4. Using library research skills and knowledge of citation practices, conduct self-directed inquiry to identify, critically evaluate, and cite relevant literature.
5. Provide feedback to others on their writing, speaking, and teamwork abilities.
6. Demonstrate ability to work in teams and manage team projects.
7. Design and deliver effective oral presentations.
8. Understand ethics and sustainability in engineering.

ABET outcomes #4, 5, and 7 will be assessed as follows:

(4) *An ability to communicate effectively with a range of audiences.*

Assessment: Communicate different engineering topics involving ethics and sustainability to a variety of audiences (public, peers, experts in field, etc.) in oral and written formats, considering feedback from peer review and instructor.

Implementation: Using knowledge of the audience to craft communication strategies to effectively engage a range of audiences is a fundamental principle of technical communication. Guidelines for effective communication will be taught throughout the course. As individuals and in teams, students will submit multiple written assignments and give oral presentation to the class. Students are assessed by multiple assignments, some of which include peer review.

(5) *An ability to recognize ethical and professional responsibilities in engineering situations and make informed judgments, which must consider the impact of engineering solutions in global, economic, environmental, and societal contexts.*

Assessment: Apply principles of technical communication ethics through proper citation practices. Identify and apply ethical analysis to evaluate engineering practices and products. Identify sustainability issues in engineering.

Implementation: Students must demonstrate their thought process in identifying ethical and sustainability issues in engineering. Students are assessed by multiple assignments, including a poster on sustainability and an individual presentation on a current ethical issue in engineering.

(6) *An ability to recognize the ongoing need to acquire new knowledge, to choose appropriate learning strategies, and to apply this knowledge.*

Assessment: This course will teach students the tools of self-directed inquiry and communication of ideas necessary for life-long learning, including evaluation of scientific literature and citation skills. Students will spend one class session in a workshop focused on library research and identifying relevant articles from scientific literature. Reliability of sources is emphasized.

Implementation: Students are required to perform a search of the current literature for every assignment. In addition, students become familiar with blogs and other modes of communication used in their field of study in the Professional Blog Post assignment.

Diversity and Inclusion:

Our teaching team strives to provide an inclusive learning environment in which all students feel safe and respected. We appreciate diversity and respect each student's individuality. We welcome individuals of all ages, backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, genders, identities, national origins, religious affiliations, sexual orientations, ability, and other visible and nonvisible differences. Students should know:

1. Every student will be treated with respect and fairness by the teaching team.
2. Students are expected to treat their classmates and the teaching team with respect at all times.
3. Any student who has suggestions or concerns about inclusivity should talk to Dr. Hendricks. Your feedback and suggestions are welcome!

To promote an inclusive learning environment:

1. "Participation" is not based on attendance, but student engagement with course activities.
2. All learning opportunities will be accessible to everyone to promote engagement of all students.
3. Inclusive language and images will be used in course materials.
4. Students will be expected to follow confidentiality guidelines established by the class.

In summary: Everyone will be treated with respect and fairness in this course. There will be no tolerance for any disrespectful behavior. Dr. Hendricks welcomes suggestions and discussion regarding creating a supportive and inclusive environment for all students.

Please see Complete Syllabus (PDF) for the following:

1. Religious Accommodations, Disability Accommodations, Land Use Acknowledgement
2. Academic Conduct, Notice of Plagiarism Detection Tool
3. Late Work Penalty

Assignments and Grading:

Assignments	Weight
#1: Professional Blog Post	22%
#2: Poster of Blog Content	20%
#3: Ethics Presentation	22%
#4: Team Research Report	23%
Journal Reflections (5 total)	4%
Elevator Pitch	4%
Participation: in-class activities and group work	5%
TOTAL	100%

Looking forward to a great quarter! ☺