

A Collection of Teaching Advice: Teaching through the Pandemic

Interactions Matter in an Online Course

Maggie LaWare, Associate Professor, Department of English, Iowa State University

This teaching brief describes four instructional strategies used in a Speech Communication course during the Fall 2020 semester: a weekly synchronous lecture, a digital humanities site assignment, a synchronous group discussion assignment, and a group annotation assignment.

Teaching and learning context

Thanks to [the CELT Course Design Institute](#), I moved my Speech Communication course, America Speaks! Great Speakers and Speeches in American history, to an online format in the Fall 2020 semester. A total of 36 students enrolled. Most students take the class for a diversity general education requirement and come from different disciplines across the academic programs (many are engineering majors).

Connection to course-learning objectives

One learning goal for the course is identifying rhetorical and stylistic devices in speeches. Another learning goal is recognizing how rhetorical devices are used within speeches to achieve the speaker's goals.

Applied teaching strategy #1: Weekly synchronous lecture

Face-to-face class sessions during non-COVID 19 semesters include question prompts, and students getting into small groups to analyze the text and respond to the prompts. I sought to emulate this format in an online course and capitalize on group virtual interactions.

I set up a weekly synchronous online lecture on Wednesdays. Before the synchronous session, I posted two lecture videos that historically contextualized the speeches assigned for the week (each was 8-12 minutes in length). I had weekly discussion boards with prompts, separating the class into two 14-person discussion boards. Students posted and replied to at least two other posts. I also set up three opportunities to attend a synchronous discussion in lieu of posting to the discussion board, using a Doodle Poll to select a time that worked for the majority. I had four or five students regularly attend these optional sessions. They enjoyed them, and so did I.

Why this strategy worked

Synchronous lectures were for connecting and being present in real time, a rarity during the pandemic Fall 2020 semester. The time together was compressed, yet it created opportunities for engagement, discussion and community building with strong instructor-student and student-student relationships. These synchronous events allowed to bring my students a bit closer to each other and relieve the feeling of isolation.

Applied teaching strategy #2: Digital humanities site

I create three group assignments in Canvas. My first step in creating the group assignments was setting up group spaces in Canvas. I created groups of five to six students to remain in these permanent Canvas spaces for each group assignment. I designated a group's leader, and I asked them to take charge of making sure everyone in their group participated.

One of my most successful assignments brought my students to a wonderful digital humanities site maintained by NC State University—the [virtual Martin Luther King, Jr. \(vMLK\) project](#). The [vMLK site](#) allows the visitor to experience an early speech by Dr. King called the “Fill-up the Jails” speech and given in Durham, North Carolina in 1960 to support students protesting segregated entrances and seating in the Royal Ice Cream Parlor in Durham. The speech was recreated at a church near the actual historical place with an actor and an audience and recorded for the digital humanities site.

Visitors to the virtual speech site can choose where they sit in the church as they listen to Dr. King. The site allows four separate vantage points moving from the stage to the balcony. I asked my students to read the speech and then listen to it from an assigned vantage point. Everyone in the group was assigned a different location with one or two students overlapping depending on the size of the group.

The students were then asked to post to their group's discussion board about how listening to the speech from their vantage point impacted their understanding and response to the speech. They also had to identify different stylistic devices and elaborate on them. Question prompts came from the [vMLK site](#). The students then read the posts of other members of their group and responded to two of these posts.

Why this strategy worked

The students discovered the impact of the location through this exercise. For example, those in the balcony had trouble hearing King's words, but the audience response guided their understanding. As one student said, she was “able to understand which key parts of the speech were the most moving for the audience based on their reactions.” Some students became curious about their peers' experiences and consequently listened to the speech from other vantage points to hear for themselves.

The vMLK project effectively simulates the experience of being in the audience and listening to Dr. King's speech; the recreated speech provides learners with a deeper understanding of how speeches inspire and move audiences. As one student remarked: “Listening to a speech can be helpful in remembering that the speeches were given by real people- not just words. It helps bring it to life and allows me to gain a deeper understanding of the speech itself...the audience response played a huge role in the emotional impact of the speech.”

Reading the peers' comments helped students understand how sitting in different locations impacts understanding: “It's really cool to see how big of an impact your seating location can make on the impact of the speech.” Another student, after reading a posting by a group member, felt he better understood the dynamic between speaker and audience: He responded, “Something I hadn't really thought about was how the audience impacts the speaker and how the speaker adjusts based off the audience. As you pointed out, MLK does this very well in this speech, altering his way of speaking based on the audience.”

Applied teaching strategy #3: Synchronous group discussion

In the last group assignment, I asked the students to use Webex or Zoom to get together with at least one member of their group, or ideally the entire group, and respond to a series of question prompts. I also gave students the option of meeting with me or the teaching assistant. I was pleased to see that two out of the seven groups managed to get the entire group together. The students posted individual discussion summaries. One group created a sheet listing each member's name under question prompts with their responses and color-coded each person.

Why this strategy worked

One student told me that he expected that he and his conversation partner would just stare at each other, but they had a good discussion! The asynchronous group assignments set the stage for students' interest in seeing each other. They knew each other's names. When given a learning task, the students were focused on completion and enjoyed their time together.

Applied teaching strategy #4: Group annotation assignment

When I first decided I wanted to create an annotation assignment, I researched online annotating tools. I turned to the Collaboration tool in Canvas and create a Google Document. Students were asked to highlight segments of the Gettysburg Address (a short but rich text) and identify the stylistic devices and explain their function. I was not specific about the annotation method. Many students used the comment function in Google Docs. However, one group assigned each person a color, and they then used that color to highlight a segment of text and comment on it below the speech. This use of color coding made it easy to see each person's contribution. The assignment had some bumps as the Collaboration tool put some people on the wrong document.

Why this strategy worked

Although the specifics about the method of annotation were missing, the activity worked well as an online engagement strategy. Annotation promoted student careful reading and analysis of the assigned texts in a shared space; it made student work transparent and available to all in the group, highlighted the contributions of each person and gave a voice to those students who might not have been comfortable speaking up in a face-to-face setting.

Additional context for the teaching strategies

These instructional strategies would work well in small, medium and large enrollment courses.

Key takeaways

Students felt the class helped deepen their understanding about the functions of different rhetorical and stylistic devices. The plus/delta survey showed that my students enjoyed synchronous discussions and wanted more. The shared annotation activity was well received and enriched the interaction in the course.