

## What Good is Accountable Talk if You Can't Understand it?

### The Importance of Teaching Kids to be Clear, Effective Speakers

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June 17, 2006

#### Research Question

How can I teach my students to be more clear, effective speakers?

#### Rationale

In my fourth grade classroom we spend a lot of time learning and sharing information by talking to each other. The children in my class have book clubs where they talk about their ideas in reading, they share current events with the whole class, they participate in whole class book conversations about read alouds, and they are constantly sharing their thinking and questions with the class.

Balanced literacy, our constructivist math program, and our child centered approach to learning all lend themselves to more time with children talking to each other, and less time with the teacher talking to the class.

I teach fourth grade at a Pre-K through 5 school in Brooklyn, New York. Our school is very diverse, though fortunate. Only 33 percent of our children qualify for free lunch, and our PTA is incredibly active and supportive. Our school

is a Teachers College Reading and Writing Project school, and my students have had reading and writing workshop since Kindergarten. They are accustomed to having book talks, and they understand the value of strong conversations in the classroom.

Upon meeting my students this year, I was not surprised that they were having sophisticated, smart conversations. They made good points about the books that they were reading, and had thoughtful questions and comments about the ideas that their classmates presented. During current events they were presenting the summary of their article, as well as questions and comments. And, during our community meetings they talked about positive things that had happened during the week, as well as concerns that they have.

The content behind these conversations was obviously strong. We spend so much time teaching kids to have good, meaningful conversations, and have also spent lots of professional development time learning about this topic. However, I was noticing that some of my students were not communicating their ideas because they were mumbling, whispering, or talking in circles. Smart ideas about characters were stated in long winded ways, talking around and around the point. Insightful current event questions were not answered because they were mumbled, and no one heard them. And, at community meetings, some of the biggest concerns were not heard because they were literally not heard, they were so quiet.

I looked at the New York State Standards for fourth grade. There is a page outlining the standards for speaking and listening which is much more extensive than I thought that it would be. (See table 1) In addition, the New York State

Learning Standards ( New York State Department of Education website:  
<http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/>) say that:

Students will read, write, listen, and *speak* for:

1. Information and Understanding
2. Literary Response and Expression
3. Critical Analysis and Evaluation
4. Social Interaction

We obviously spend a lot of time teaching students to read and write according to these literacy standards. However, I think that very little time, if any, is spent teaching speaking and listening. I began to realize that my students needed to learn the skills behind clear, effective public speaking in order to communicate the information which I expected them to share. I also thought that the students would become better listeners if the speakers were more engaging.

**Table 1: New York State Speaking Standards (excerpt)**

Students will:

- Speak in response to texts
- Use age-appropriate vocabulary
- Use correct grammar
- Include relevant details
- Communicate ideas in an organized way
- Vary formality according to audience
- Use expression, volume, pace, and gestures appropriate for the purpose and setting
- Offer feedback to others

I decided to start helping them master the speaking standards by having students evaluate speaking during current event presentations, something that we were doing anyway. I also began taking notes, and checking off what they were doing well whenever they were speaking to each other. Right away, I found that the things that they needed work on were the same for presentations, like current events, as well as more conversational speaking like community meetings.

After listening to the children's speaking for several weeks I began to notice some patterns. I decided to teach short mini-lessons on good speaking qualities before asking them to practice these qualities as they did whatever activity we were doing.

## Review of Literature

Public speaking is, of course, taught in high school and college. And, often speaking skills are taught to very young children, pre-school through grade 1 age students. However, there was little evidence of teaching speaking skills to students between the ages of 6 and 18 .

Matt Wayne (2001), a seventh grade teacher, wanted his students to work towards meeting the New York State speaking and listening standards during their reading and writing discussions. He had the students pay attention to their own speaking patterns, and reflect on how the discussions were going. He found that having the students collect data about their own behaviors was essential in working together as a community to make improvements.

In 1972, Fred Niedermeyer and Linda Oliver worked with Kindergarteners and first graders and published a study on speaking in *The Elementary School Journal*. They discuss the difficulty that many children have in communicating in a clear way. They feel that children need lots of opportunities to practice public speaking skills, as well as clear instruction on how to speak. Niedermeyer and Oliver also discuss the lack of instruction in the primary grades. They found that teaching one speaking lesson per week to the first graders and kindergarteners increased their ability to communicate in dramatic and extemporaneous speaking. Some of the improvements were: they were better able to speak in complete sentences, stick to the topic they were speaking about, use appropriate volume, and seemed more involved and invested in their own performance. The researchers also found that there is a need for curriculum development in speaking. The teachers who implemented the lessons needed more support, and some had never taught speaking skills before, and therefore felt they could have done a better job.

David Lavasseur, Kevin Dean, and Julie Pfaff published a study in *Communication Education* (2004) about higher level public speaking studies. They found that in college, public speaking is often taught, but rarely as an advanced study. This is important because we are putting little emphasis on public speaking in school, to the point that it is not considered something that you can pursue further beyond an entry level public speaking course.

## The Study

### Teaching Public Speaking Mini-Lessons

After collecting initial data about how my kids were currently speaking, and looking at the lessons that were taught during Niedermeyer and Oliver's study, I decided on the following teaching points for a series of lessons:

- Learning how to use note cards to focus talk
- Using appropriate Volume
- Speaking with enthusiasm
- Speaking slowly enough to be clear to the audience
- Speaking in complete thoughts or sentences
- Pausing between thoughts or sentences
- Using a speaking rubric to help your partner get better
- Think about exactly how you are going to start talking before you speak

I taught one skill during a week when it was appropriate to a specific content area that we were studying. Each had an activity that the children were assigned in order to practice what we were learning, both in speaking and in the content area ( See table 2). I tried to find ways to reinforce what we were learning, and not take time away from the day. I didn't have time to add an extra space to the day just for public speaking work. I wanted to find ways to weave the speaking work into the rest of the curriculum.

**Table 2- Teaching speaking skills within different curriculum areas**

Speaking Skill	Content area/ Topic	Activity
Appropriate Volume	Social Studies- Native American poetry interpretation	Poetry reading of Native American poems of thanks. Groups used one or more voices in unison to use different volumes for emphasis.
Speaking in sentences	Current events	Each child presented their opinion about the article and two reasons to support it. Each child tried to say only three focused sentences.
Using note cards to organize your speaking	Community Meeting	Share what you are looking forward to doing over the winter break. Try to avoid saying “umm” or “like” by planning.
Pausing between sentences or thoughts	Social Studies – Explorers	Explorers end of unit presentation. Students planned a presentation using notecards to share what they learned.
Stopping and thinking about how you will start before you speak	Writing – Realistic Fiction	Each child answered a question on the spot about their realistic fiction character.
Using expression	Social Studies- Colonial America	After reading about a colonial America topic each child shared the most interesting thing that they learned, remembering to use expression.
Speaking slowly and clearly	Writing- poetry	Perform a line of poetry that answers the question “why poetry?”
Using a rubric	Current events	Each time current events are shared (twice a month) a partner fills out a rubric and gives it to the speaker.
Speaking clearly	Math- Data unit	Each child shared the question that they were researching and the data that they collected to answer it.

## Using Speaking Partners

In January, I assigned each child a speaking partner. This partner was randomly assigned, and would give his/her partner feedback on how their speaking work was going. In order to get started with this work, I asked the class to make a rubric that we could use for our work. We came up with a rubric (see table 3) by working independently, then in small groups, and finally compiling what we had together and making some compromises. I wanted the rubric to be simple enough that it was easy to use, and could be used for any activity that we were doing.

Part of the New York State Speaking Standards is offering feedback to others, and we were doing just that. Using the rubric allowed the students to get feedback on their work, and it also forced them to focus on speaking, and not just content, as others were speaking. The students knew that whenever they were speaking to the group, their speaking partner was going to get a rubric, and evaluate them. We made many copies of the rubric, and made it easily accessible so that it was easy to use.

**Table 3- Class speaking rubric**

0= Didn't do this
1= Did this most of the time
2= Did this really well
Spoke enthusiastically _____
Spoke clearly- was easy to understand _____
Spoke in sentences or complete thoughts _____
Paused between sentences or thoughts _____
Good Volume _____
Didn't say "umm", "like" etc. too much _____

## Data Collection

Data collection falls into three categories: my checklists and assessments of student speaking behavior, journal entries and my reflections, and written student reflections.

### *Checklists*

For every activity that I assigned throughout this process I created a simple checklist. I would write 3 to 6 things that I would be listening for as the student was speaking. I would simply jot a check if they were doing it, and leave a blank space if they were not. In this way I could look for patterns across the class regarding different things that I had taught and how the kids were doing with those skills.

### *My Reflections*

Keeping track of how things were going in the classroom from my point of view was, in some cases, more helpful than the qualitative data of the checklists. Each kid had different strengths and weaknesses and I was always noticing strengths during an activity that I wasn't even looking for. Among other things, I jotted down who each activity worked well for, what I would change, and what the kids really seemed to learn from it.

### *Student Reflections*

In January and June I asked the students to tell me what they thought about the

work that we were doing. They answered questions about their feelings toward public speaking, what they felt they needed to work on, and what they felt that they were good at in speaking. These reflections let me see how the work that we were doing was perceived by the students.

## Data

### *Checklists*

By noticing individual speaking behaviors during activities I noticed some changes overall for the class. Appropriate use of volume, expression, and the ability to speak in complete thoughts and come to a point quickly -- all improved for the class as a whole.

	<b>January- Native American poem presentation</b>	<b>March – explorers presentation</b>
Students using appropriate volume	8 out of 18	18 out of 18
Students using expression	1 out of 18	11 out of 18
	<b>December- talking about current events</b>	<b>February – Sharing interesting findings about explorers</b>
Students who spoke in complete thoughts and were able to quickly come to the point	4 out of 19	15 out of 21

My checklists also allowed me to see that there were not always patterns across the class. After looking at my checklists, I noticed three kinds of kids:

1. There were the kids in the middle. These kids most easily took what I was teaching and used it consistently. These were kids who were comfortable speaking in front of the group, and who pretty consistently grew as speakers.
2. The second group was kids who were very shy, and who you could not hear at all when they did speak. There were three kids like this in my class. In most cases they were actually speaking in complete thoughts without the “ummm” or “like” that the rest of the class was stuck on. These kids were nervous, so they thought carefully about everything that they said. On my checklists I usually had everything checked off for them except volume and expression. However, they were so quiet you literally could not hear anything that they said. I realized that with them, I only had to focus increasing their volume and their confidence in front of the audience.
3. The third group included my strongest, most confident students. There were 5 kids who fell into this group. This group was the one taking up lots of our time during class conversations because they went on and on, talking around the point that they were trying to make. They were loud, and very enthusiastic. I noticed them on my checklists because they had everything checked off – volume, expression, eye contact, clear speaking voice, etc., but they could not say what they had to say quickly. They repeated themselves a lot, and had a lot of difficulty when we started working on speaking in complete thoughts or sentences. This group really needed to work on being able to come to the point more quickly. They had such smart things to say,

and yet were using so much time to get to the point they often lost the attention of the class. They also needed to become better listeners.

### *My Reflections*

I kept track of the different activities that we did in class, and how they went. Looking back at my reflections, it is helpful to see how many different kinds of activities we did, and how they fit into so many content areas. I also used time for two purposes- to teach or reinforce content we were learning, and to practice speaking skills. I was very interested in doing this work within our already tight schedule.

First, I was able to use community meeting time more effectively. Most classrooms have community meetings in my school. It was easy, and helpful to ask students to also think about volume, enthusiasm, or whatever speaking skill we were thinking about as they shared during our meeting.

During reading, writing, math, and social studies, I pushed myself to rethink the typical assignments that I would have given. For example, one day I changed what I would normally have done during our realistic fiction study because of our focus on how good speakers stop and think about what they are going to say before they start talking. I would normally have had the children interview each other about their characters. This time, I had the class sit in a circle and I asked each child a different question about their character. They had to think about what made sense for their character using what we were learning and writing and in speaking.

## *Student Reflections*

On January 26, I asked the students to answer some reflection questions:

1. How do you feel about speaking in front of the class?
2. Do you think that you are good at it?
3. What do you think that you need to work on as a speaker?
4. How were you as a speaker in your class last year?
5. How do you feel about speaking in front of our class now compared to the beginning of the year?

I learned something from each question. For the first question, 18 out of 22 students overwhelmingly said that they really enjoyed speaking in front of the class. And, to the second question, they also said that they were really good at it. There was a lot of confidence from everyone except that quiet group of students I had identified. They wrote things like “I don’t like speaking in front of people” and “I feel really nervous because the whole class is staring at you.” They also did not think that they were good at it, often attributing this to nervousness.

Question 3 taught me that almost every student had an amazing understanding of what they needed to work on as a speaker. The quietest child said she needed to “be loud and clear and not lower down at the end of a sentence”. One of my strong talkers who had trouble coming to a point said that she needed to work on “summing things up and letting others speak”. Two months of working on speaking skills had at least made them aware of what they needed to work on.

Finally, I learned that the students did not do a lot of work on speaking before this year. I was not surprised to learn this because I, too, had not done this work before. The kids mostly felt that they were much better at speaking this year

because they rarely worked on it last year. Some kids said that they really didn't know how they were as speakers last year.

The June student reflection asked the students what they thought about the speaking activities that we did this year, and how they feel about giving presentations. The class felt like the activities that we did were fun, and they wrote about many different activities that we did. Some kids made lists of seven and more activities that they enjoyed. Two of my quiet voices even had positive feelings about the speaking work. One said "it was fun to be in a group and to speak on my own" and another said "I was happy to do a presentation because I could share my idea with everyone instead of just writing it down."

Student reflections were helpful in showing me how much the kids enjoyed the speaking work that we did. They loved being able to share the information that they were learning with their classmates. Many times students show what they have learned through writing, and this change was exciting for them. Also, I realized how aware the kids were of their speaking. They know what they are good at, and what they need to work on. They are more confident as well, which I hope will help them as they continue in school and life!

## Analysis

I found that it is possible to teach public speaking without taking time away from other curriculum areas. It is easy to make speaking a part of an activity within any content area. And, kids enjoy speaking activities, and put more effort

into organizing information that they will present orally than information that they will simply write and turn in.

As Niedermeyer and Oliver (1972) found, practice is essential. Making time for kids to speak in front of each other is important. I found that with this practice the kids became better at coming to the point quickly, without going on and on. And they were better at using expression and appropriate volume. Because of this the kids were able to communicate information more effectively, and therefore, their peers listened more carefully. Before, lots of time was wasted when kids were talking, because many kids were not listening.

Kids' confidence in their own speaking increased. They found it fun, and less stressful. It was something that we did often, so it wasn't a big presentation that is anticipated, but a regular part of our week. This regular speaking in front of the class makes it a routine that should be done well, rather than a stressful event.

As Matt Wayne found (2001), it was helpful for my students to be a part of their own learning process. Because they evaluated each other and themselves, they became very aware of what they need to work on, as well as what they are good at. Making the kids part of the research process made them more invested in their own speaking skills.

Finally, the 3 children in my class who never wanted to talk in front of the class at all, and who mumbled quietly to themselves, now speak loudly, and clearly. Each time one of these children spoke in front of the class and received positive feedback their confidence increased. Their classmates were very supportive, and made them feel safe during the presentations. They also saw how

interested their classmates were in what they were sharing. During current events children offered feedback about the presentation, and asked the presenter questions. Two of the children who were nervous about the presentation put time into preparing their current event, and they were confident about the information they were sharing. One went from literally crying, to enjoying sharing current events. These are the children who fear speaking so much that they rarely participate. Changing their feelings about speaking will help them for the rest of their educational lives. And, if they were to have started this kind of work even earlier, I think they may have never had these feelings about speaking.

### Policy Implications

The ability to speak clearly and make your point effectively is a life skill which we should be teaching our students. It is also a New York State Learning Standard. Yet, often this is something that we do not spend time teaching our students. There are not a lot of resources or curriculum ideas for teaching speaking to elementary age students, and most teachers are focusing on the content of the talk without teaching students to be better speakers.

1. Speaking skills should be taught in school. Students should know what it means to be a good speaker, and should be given opportunities to practice those skills.
2. Oral presentations of information learned should be expected often, as opposed to always assigning written products. Students enjoy presenting information they have learned, and it gives them valuable practice in clearly presenting information.

3. Teachers need professional development on the teaching of speaking skills. Also, there needs to be access to resources and curriculum for teaching speaking as there is for other content areas.

## Research

Levasseur, David, Kevin Dean, and Julie Pfaff. (2004). Speech Pedagogy Beyond the Basics: A Study of Instructional Methods in the Advanced Public Speaking Course. *Communication Education*, 53, 234-252.

Niedermeyer, Fred and Linda Oliver. (1972). The Development of Young Children's Dramatic and Public Speaking Skills. *The Elementary School Journal*, 73, 95-100.

Wayne, Matt. *Getting Smarter at School: A 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Class Researches and Reflects on it's Discussion Habits*. Teachers Network Policy Institute, New York.