

My Favorite Assignment—A Storm Surge of Teaching Innovations

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Abstract

This article presents a curated collection of 10 teaching innovations debuted at the Association for Business Communication's 87th annual meeting held in Tampa, Florida, USA, and online October 2022. This *My Favorite Assignment* 27th edition introduces readers to classroom-ready ideas to help students gain personal and professional development, and a host of fresh assignment topics designed to invigorate both classic and new assignments. Teaching support materials—instructions to students, stimulus materials, slides, grading rubrics, frequently asked questions, Internet links, and sample student projects—are downloadable from the Association for Business Communication and DePaul University Center for Sales Leadership websites.

Keywords

My Favorite Assignment, pedagogy, innovation, experiential learning

Hurricane Ian thundered past Tampa just a week before Association for Business Communication members flooded into that subtropical city bringing a wave of innovative teaching methods to the 87th Annual ABC International Conference.

This collection, the 27th in the series, presents 10 *Favorite Assignments* selected from the 63 teaching innovations presented at those popular sessions. Presenters have just 3 minutes to convey their *Favorite Assignment* to a highly appreciative audience. Should a presenter break the 3-minute barrier, a bell is run signaling the end of their time on stage. Every presenter receives the traditional *My Favorite Assignment Thunderous Applause* from their warm-hearted Association for Business Communication (ABC) colleagues.

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Readers can consider classroom-tested assignments designed to help learners advance their personal development. Also, professors wishing to freshen their mainstay learning goals can nest their learning objects in unique assignment topics—giving students inspiring engaging, useful, and fun business communication skill building scenarios.

ABC members share a passion for active learning. The assignments showcased here are designed to engage students' practical skill building, judgment, and communication skills through experiential and active learning. If you're interested in exploring this article's *Favorite Assignments* in greater depth, you can download additional materials from <http://www.businesscommunication.org/page/assignments>. Readers may also access the *My Favorite Assignment* teaching resources at <https://salesleadershipcenter.com/research/business-professional-communication-quarterly-my-favorite-assignment>. You'll see classroom-tested learning objects, instructions students, stimulus and exercise materials, slides, grading rubrics, frequently asked questions (FAQs), and sample student work products.

Personal Development

Pitch With a Twist: Perform Your Speaking Anxieties

Stacy Rosenberg

Carnegie Mellon University

Genre

Anxiety management, experiential learning, presentation skills, vocal skills, nonverbal communication, personal and professional development

The Assignment

Pitch With a Twist gives students useful tools to manage their communication anxiety.

First, the instructor leads a discussion that helps students identify specific aspects of public speaking that make them feel anxious. For example, anticipation of technology failing, feeling judged, having a limited time to prepare, or other stressful scenarios. Next, students are asked to describe how the anxiety physically manifests in their bodies (such as an elevating heart rate, losing their train of thought, speaking too quickly, avoiding eye contact, pacing, et cetera).

Then, students plan a 2-minute pitch targeting a recruiter at a job fair. The learning intervention takes place as they deliver a pitch acting out the nervous symptoms that they typically experience when speaking publicly. Then, they brainstorm tactics to lower stress prior to speaking and to manage nervous symptoms while presenting. Finally, they deliver a more confident, professional pitch omitting the symptoms of anxiety previously identified.

Target Learners

Undergraduate and first-year graduate students

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Identify stress factors for presenters
- Explore anxiety's physically symptoms
- Plan and practice vocal and nonverbal tactics to manage speaking anxiety
- Demonstrate professionalism and confidence when presenting

Time to Complete the Assignment

- 15 minutes: Discussion to identify stressful public speaking scenarios and how that stress shows up physically
- 15 minutes: Students plan their job pitch
- 15 minutes: Brainstorm tactics to lower stress prior to speaking and to manage nervous symptoms while presenting
- 5 minutes: Presenting time per student including pitch showing nervous symptoms and a confident pitch
- Assignment can be split over 2 class meetings or conducted as a peer-to-peer activity to save class time

Materials, Equipment, Special Considerations

- A timer
- Some students are uncomfortable discussing their nervous symptoms with the class
- Discussion participation can be optional but participation in the exercise is required

Evaluating Outcomes

- Students are evaluated on active engagement
- Grading rubric provided (see Support Materials below)

Support Materials

- Assignment instructions
- Presentation rubric
- Slides

And the Winner Is . . . Not You

Katherine Ryan

Indiana University

Genre

Business writing strategy, delivering bad news, critical thinking, peer review and feedback, oral communication, presentation skills, experiential learning

The Assignment

Students learn to convey bad news in this lively classroom experience. In *And the Winner is . . . Not You* the negative news is delivered employing an authentic two-tiered feedback exchange between classmates.

First, students assess a business case problem. Next, they create and deliver their assessment via a consulting pitch. Next, the class judges the presentations producing a ranking. Then, each student writes an email to the team with the least successful pitch, giving them the bad news: Their last place ranking.

Finally, after the low-ranking team has received their unfavorable news emails students meet with the teams. The recipients relate their reaction to how the writer delivered the bad news. This closing of the feedback loop sets up the opportunity for both givers and receivers to apply feedback in subsequent assignments

This experiential learning activity builds essential skills in delivering bad news with authenticity, effectiveness, and empathy.

Target Learners

Undergraduate students

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Assess a business case problem
- Deliver a consulting pitch
- Listen to and evaluate a consulting pitch
- Create a message strategy to deliver bad news
- Apply the indirect strategy to convey bad news
- Write a clear, concise, audience-centered business document
- Share and respond to peer feedback to reinforce business communication skills

Time to Complete the Assignment

- Two class periods with bad news email delivered in between
- 45-60 minutes: Teams deliver consulting pitches (bad news email assigned as homework)
- 45-60 minutes: Teams discuss emails they received in a round robin format

Materials, Equipment, Special Considerations

- A team response to a business case problem is essential
- Presentations are the most effective stimulus material
- A memo or short report may be substituted
- Recipients' debriefing and appraisal of the bad news message and delivery is essential
- Allocate sufficient class time for writers and teams to meet face-to-face

Evaluating Outcomes

A grading rubric is provided (see Support Materials below)

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Stimulus and exercise materials
- Slides
- Grading rubric
- Sample student work product

Communicating to Create and Deepen Connections

**Amy Mickel, Ryan Fuller, Laura Riolli, Hakan Ozcelik,
and Joseph Richards**

California State University, Sacramento

Genre

Networking, building relationships, written communication, experiential learning, reflection

The Assignment

This lively classroom experience builds skills in initiating and fostering useful human connections between students. When students feel like they belong it

contributes to their sense of well-being and academic success. Students report they wanted their instructors to:

- Help them connect with classmates outside of class and other students across campus
- Conduct assignments where they are required to meet and interact with fellow students.

First, participants learn about Mirivel's (2014) six-behavior model of positive communication:

1. Greeting
2. Asking
3. Complimenting
4. Listening
5. Disclosing
6. Encouraging

Next, students are instructed to make eye contact with someone in the classroom they don't know. They approach that person. Then, working in pairs, students practice the Mirivel behaviors of *greeting* and *asking*. Finally, learners debrief relating their learning experience.

Outside Practice

Students select an event from list of student organizations. They attend one event. Student's mission at the event is to converse with at least two other people and practice their new greeting and asking skills. After the event, participants take notes on the experience. Back in class, students reflect on their experience, and practice the behaviors of complimenting, disclosing, encouraging, and listening. Finally, students turn in a written assignment that reflects on the positive and challenging aspects of the experience.

This assignment allows students to immediately practice these behaviors and, thus, foster and deepen connections with their classmates.

Target Learners

Undergraduate (juniors and seniors) and graduate

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Understand a Mirivel's model of positive communication
- Apply the six behaviors
- Practice positive communication behaviors in small-group settings

- Extend skill learning in outside classroom settings
- Build confidence in establishing new relationships
- Enhance networking skills
- Reflect on how intentional positive communication behaviors can foster and deepen interpersonal connections and increase a sense of belonging in organizations

Time to Complete the Assignment

- One-class period: Introduce the model and initiate student-pair discussions
- Variable time frame: Students participate in meeting outside of class
- One-class period: Reflect on meeting outside of class

Materials, Equipment, Special Considerations

- List of student club meetings
- Initial activity and debrief can be run face-to-face or virtually
- Student pairs to practice and reflect on positive communication behaviors

Evaluating Outcomes

Grading rubric provided (see Support Material below)

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Slides
- Grading rubric

Unique Assignment Topics

Best Boss a Sneaky Way to Teach Justification Reports

Barbara L. Bolt

University of South Carolina

Genre

Report Writing, secondary research, analysis and critical thinking, persuasion, experiential learning

The Assignment

Students learn first-hand about communication and professionalization from top CEOs.

First, students begin by listening to the stories of three different entrepreneurs via the podcast *How I Built This* (Raz, 2016-present). Next, each student selects a “Best Boss” and provides justification evidence. These criteria are determined by each student through comparison/contrast of the three entrepreneurs.

This exercise is an opportunity to demonstrate a variety of skills such as performing secondary research and applying critical thinking. Students incorporate their evidence into an informative message that follows best practices for professional communication.

An added benefit is that students begin to think about the qualities that make an ideal boss, how one becomes successful, and how to develop and live a professional persona. This assignment appeals to students for its mix of fascinating business personalities and real-world application to themselves.

Target Learners

Undergraduates

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Conduct and curate secondary research
- Incorporate evidence into a report
- Demonstrate how evidence justifies conclusions
- Perform report writing best practices.
- Learn about different definitions of “success” in business

Time to Complete the Assignment

- 1-2 weeks
- The students need ample time to listen to the podcasts, reflect on the content, create the deliverables, participate in peer reviews (optional).

Evaluating Outcomes

Grading rubric provided (see Support Materials below)

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Grading rubric
- FAQs

Individual Ethics Presentation

Maria Colman

USC Marshall School of Business

Genre

Presentation

The Assignment

Students have 2 minutes to relate what ethics or sustainability means to them. Specifically, participants talk about how it impacts them—at school, at work, and in their lives.

First, students introduce themselves and their topic. Second, the presenter illustrates either ethical behavior or what sustainability means through a story or example. Finally, the student reveals their personal stance on the topic.

The presenter applies everything they have learned during the semester about delivering an effective presentation. Creativity is encouraged.

Target Learners

Undergraduate

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Prepare and deliver a short presentation
- Distill a complex topic (ethics or sustainability) into a brief message
- Employ storytelling or create audience salient examples

Time to Complete the Assignment

- 1 week

Evaluating Outcomes

Grading rubric provided (see Support Materials below)

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Grading rubric

My Big Comic Book Idea Transforming Business Leadership Lessons From the Comic Book Industry

Trent Deckard

Indiana University, USA

Genre

Creative project, secondary research, report writing, presentation

The Assignment

Core business skills are taught as students create a *Big Comic Book Idea* of their own.

First, students explore the comic book industry including creator rights (who gets paid and the credit), issues of representation (who is creating the comics and featured in them), and the production process creators experience.

Students also envision character(s), the distribution vehicles: series, movie, product, attraction, destination, or perhaps, something new that has never been considered by the comic book industry. Next, participants craft a proposal that includes the specific “selling” details, timeline for the project, how the content will be delivered to readers, viewers, or consumers. Students also discuss potential buyers or investors for the idea, financial considerations for getting started, and whether their idea already has any place in the comic book industry. Marketing, advertising, and financial elements are a real business-student plus in this project.

Finally, the *Big Comic Book Idea* is delivered via a written report, storyboard, slide deck, or video that helps illustrate the creator(s)’ vision.

This type of creative project could be applicable to multiple genres of creative art, culture, or business.

Target Learners

Undergraduate, Adult Education, Executive Education

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Create original comic book concepts
- Conduct secondary research
- Consider germane business factors
- Reflect on their creative process and how representation matters in their work
- Competitively sell their idea to peers
- Sharpen their writing and presentation skills

Time to Complete the Assignment

- 2 to 4 weeks

Evaluating Outcomes

Grading rubric provided (see Support Materials below)

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Stimulus and exercise materials
- Slides
- Grading rubric
- FAQs
- Sample student work product

Developing Business Communication Skills in the Dragons' Den

Oksana Shkurska

Dalhousie University

Genre

Secondary research, role playing, presentation, role-play, critical thinking, audience analysis, persuasion, experiential learning

The Assignment

Students learn how to effectively pitch business ideas and hone their critical and creative thinking skills while preparing and delivering an entrepreneurial pitch. This simulation is based on the *Dragons' Den* TV Show (Olsen & Davies, 2005-2022) wherein entrepreneurs try to convince investors (Dragons) that their business is worth investment. If they are successful, the Dragons invest in the business.

Students play two roles in this assignment. First, students deliver a 2-minute pitch, trying to persuade the Dragons to invest in their business idea. Second, students play the role of a Dragon to evaluate their fellow students' business ideas.

Target Learners

Undergraduate

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Conduct research on innovative products/services
- Analyze the advantages and disadvantages
- Prepare and deliver a 2-minute persuasive product/service pitch
- Apply audience analysis
- Use effective techniques to develop rapport and engage the audience
- Practice active and polite listening
- Justify business decisions

Time to Complete the Assignment

- 3-4 hours

Evaluating Outcomes

Grading rubric provided (see Support Materials below)

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Slides
- Grading rubric

The Possibility of Critical Reflexivity in Business Communication: Application in Case Studies

Raihan Jamil

University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

Genre

Oral communication, written communication, critical self-reflection, audience analysis, organizational communication, case analysis, experiential learning, critical thinking

The Assignment

Students apply critical self-reflection to frame issues in organizational communication.

First, the instructor leads a case discussion focusing on cultural diversity. Particular attention is paid to the students' methods and analysis. For example, the class may consider a case about linguistic hegemony that illustrates cultural diversity in organizational practices. Then, students critique their own and other's cultural assumptions and values. Students focus on being critically reflexive by acknowledging relative positions of privilege while considering research goals. Finally, a class dialogue focuses on what took place and how it could be questioned.

Learners come to understand how their life experiences can play a role in shaping their perception of everyday organizational realities.

Target Learners

Undergraduate and graduate students

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Develop critical thinking skills
- Engage in critical reflexivity
- Discover insights into perceptual framing of real-world issues
- Present and defend ideas

Time to Complete the Assignment

Can accommodate various class times:

- Students can prepare at home or in class
- Discussion can be held in one class period or could be spread out across several periods
- With each iteration, students' analysis becomes more complex requiring more time

Materials, Equipment, Special Considerations

- Case(s)

Evaluating Outcomes

This activity is a hands-on critical reflection experience. A relaxed environment is useful. No formal grading is recommended. Evaluation takes place through:

- Class feedback
- Understanding/application of the concept
- Choice/creativity of suggestions
- Audience analysis
- Providing real life examples

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Slides
- FAQs

Courageous Leadership & Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Kathryn A. Cañas and Georgi A. Rausch

University of Utah David Eccles School of Business

Genre

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, analysis and critical thinking, secondary research, written communication, presentation, group discussion

The Assignment

Students examine a business leader they perceive as innovative and courageous in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI).

First, students analyze how the leader's DEI communication reinforces their actions, policy, and initiatives on both organizational and personal levels. Students also assess how the leader empowers organizational members and creates a sense of belonging by implementing DEI systemically throughout the organization. Students may focus on the company's CEO and/or Chief Diversity Officer (CDO).

Next, students write a short essay. A list of topics can be found in Support Materials below. Then, oral communication comes into play. Students deliver a mini presentation in either a small group setting or before the class. Discussion must include specified topics (see List of Topics, Support Materials).

This assignment is also effective as a formal public speaking assignment in which students develop slides/visuals, stand in the front of the classroom, and speak extemporaneously about their courageous DEI leader.

Target Learners

Undergraduate and graduate students

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Integrate the topic of DEI with business communication skills
- Examine a business leader they perceive as innovative and courageous in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)
- Analyze how the leader's communication/rhetoric about DEI reinforces their actions, policy, and initiatives on both organizational and personal levels
- Use written communication skills to craft a comprehensive mini analysis/report
- Use presentation skills and group communication skills to illustrate why the leader is courageous in the DEI landscape

Time to Complete the Assignment

- Paper
- Workshop paper in class (1 hour)
- Write the final draft of the paper (2 hours)
- Presentation
- Workshop the presentation in class (1 hour)
- Craft final presentation (1 hour)
- Deliver presentation (3 to 5 min)
- Group exercise
- Gather information on leader (1 hour)
- Present informally in groups (30 min)
- Approximately 5 minutes is allotted to discuss the leader's DEI rhetoric and specific DEI initiatives the leader implements throughout the organization

Evaluating Outcomes

- Quality of essay's structure, analysis depth of discussion
- Students must include material from at least two *Harvard Business Review* articles on DEI and leadership (see Support Materials below)
- Additional research
- Grading rubric provided (see Support Materials)

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Stimulus and exercise materials
- List of topics
- Slides
- Grading rubric

- Sample student work product
- Links to online material

The Milk Jug: A Visual Rhetorical Analysis

Jessie Lynn Richards

University of Utah

Genre

Rhetorical analysis, secondary research, analysis and critical thinking, persuasion, oral communication

The Assignment

Students pick “a rhetorical artifact” that is an everyday object but is also meaningful to them. They complete a six-part visual rhetorical analysis of the artifact and then present their findings—concluding with an argument about the artifact’s persuasive function. Students use the vocabulary of rhetorical analysis and visual rhetoric to articulate their findings.

Target Learners

Undergraduate

Learning Objectives

Students will do the following:

- Conduct research to understand the history, context, and usages of an everyday artifact
- Evaluate the rhetorical function and elements of persuasion that the artifact affords
- Articulate how the artifact’s visual rhetoric impacts its audience/users
- Present an argument about the persuasive functions of the artifact in an oral presentation

Time to Complete the Assignment

This assignment is best completed in a two-part (multiday) lesson. Day 1 goes over rhetorical vocabulary and functions with full class practice examples. On Day 2, students present their own analysis.

Materials, Equipment, Special Considerations

- Slides with rhetorical analysis vocabulary and examples
- Magazines or advertisements to practice visual analysis as a class
- Examples of everyday objects (not advertisements)

Evaluating Outcomes

- Application of class materials and vocabulary to describe artifact's visual rhetoric
- Use of vocabulary to analyze rhetorical function/devices and elements of persuasion
- Quality of argument about object's persuasive elements, purpose, and impact
- (Optional) Application of oral presentation best practices if using this assignment to practice oral argumentation

Support Materials

- Instructions to students
- Stimulus and exercise materials
- Grading rubric
- Links to online material

Summary

This is the first of four *My Favorite Assignment* articles planned for 2023. Thanks to *BPCQ* Editor Robyn Walker's vision, additional *My Favorite Assignments* offering innovative, classroom-tested methods will also appear in this year's June, September, and December *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* issues.

As you read your colleagues' ideas perhaps you found yourself inspired to relate your favorite assignment. We hope you'll share one of your teaching innovations. If selected you'll present at the next ABC annual conference planned for Denver, Colorado, USA, October 2023. Please watch your email for your invitation to submit your pet pedagogy in March 2023.

Each of this year's *Favorite Assignments* were anonymously peer-reviewed by three leading communication education scholars. A cohort of 43 reviewers lent their time and expertise building this paper's scholarly rigor. Thanks in part to their generous spirits and deep wisdom, *BPCQ* maintains its position as the premiere journal recording business communication teaching and scholarship.

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D. Joel Whalen teaches in the Center for Sales Leadership at DePaul University, where he is an associate professor of marketing. He has received numerous teaching and business awards. A talented team of DePaul University instructors teach his effective business communication class. He wrote *Professional Communications Toolkit* (Sage, 2006) and *4-Second PowerPoint Slides* (Spenser & McGee, 2019).

Charles Drehmer is a teaching award-winning Executive in Residence at DePaul University's Driehaus College of Business bringing years of business experience to the classroom. He teaches effective business communication as well as numerous other sales courses. He is the co-designer of *EBC-DISC*, a behavioral/psychological inventory that yields practical insights into people's business communication attitudes and behaviors.