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## Reducing Anxiety While Boosting Creativity: Lessons from the Progymnasmata

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# Reducing Anxiety While Boosting Creativity: Lessons from the *Progymnasmata*

### The practice and the need it addresses

#### Student Anxiety

The fear of public speaking is a widely shared among individuals. This can be difficult to overcome when students are assigned several large, heavily-weighted speeches with few opportunities to become acclimated to standing in front of an audience.

#### Limited Time to Improve

Larger class sections are common at major universities like UNLV. This is a special challenge for public speaking classes because students are afforded fewer opportunities to give speeches. In a public speaking class of 30 students, professors easily devote 1/3 of their class time to listening to the three major speech assignments alone.

#### Method

Several times throughout the semester students are assigned a 2–3 minute long speech inspired by the *progymnasmata* (a series of rhetorical exercises from Ancient Greece). The speeches vary widely from presenting a fable to impersonating an individual.

These speeches increase in difficulty throughout the semester. Just as a weight lifter steadily increases weights, so, too, do students progress to more challenging speech assignments.

### Evidence this practice benefits UNLV Students

#### Student Responses

These “mini speeches” are routinely praised by my students as instrumental in their growth as a speaker. Here’s a small sample of their responses:

- “The many mini speeches we had to do helped build my confidence when it comes to public speaking.”
- “I liked how we had plenty of opportunities to practice and improve our public speaking. I think this is way more effective than just having students do three big speeches all semester, and not having an opportunity to improve with each speech.”
- “Doing different types of speeches helped me because I used different aspects of each to improve my own speeches.”

These speeches are successful for many reasons. They give students low-pressure speaking situations that encourage creativity. Each speech acclimates students to standing in front of an audience. Finally, the variety provided by these speeches serve as a building block to larger speeches. A fable’s moral can teach students how to write a thesis statement. Likewise, the narrative speech teaches an important feature of most speeches; namely, telling a sequence of events clearly.

### Resources and where to find them

#### *Progymnasmata* Scholarship

Fleming, J. David. “The Very Idea of A *Progymnasmata*.” *Rhetoric Review* 22, no. 2 (2003): 105–120.

Hagaman, John. “Modern Use of the *Progymnasmata* in Teaching Rhetorical Invention.” *Rhetoric Review* 5, no. 1 (1986): 22–29.

Kennedy, George Alexander, ed. *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*. Brill, 2003.

Ray, Brian. “A *Progymnasmata* for Our Time: Adapting Classical Exercises to Teach Translingual Style.” *Rhetoric Review* 32, no. 2 (2013): 191–209.

#### The Original *Progymnasmata*

1. Fable
2. Narrative
3. Anecdote
4. Proverb
5. Refutation
6. Confirmation
7. Commonplace
8. Encomium (speech of praise)
9. Invective (speech of blame)
10. Comparison
11. Impersonation
12. Description
13. Thesis
14. Proposal of a Law

### How other UNLV teachers might adopt this practice

#### An Approach for All Disciplines

Each discipline can readily incorporate these speaking exercises into their classes. Pick and choose exercises that seem most relevant. Feel free to invent your own!

In my presidential rhetoric class, I have students impersonate a president giving a war message. Doing so teaches them genre and historic context.

In a chemistry class, I would have students give a speech of praise or blame about an element or compound. What are the uses of NaCl? What about <sup>235</sup>U? Doing so would encourage students to think about the real-world applications of their knowledge.

In a pre-med class, I would assign my students to describe their patient’s response upon learning of a terminal diagnosis. Inviting students to think ahead to such scenarios would help cultivate empathy and lead into a discussion on what they might say when faced with such a situation.

#### Grading Practices

I grade these speeches out of 50 points. 10 points is for their outline, 20 for their content, and 20 for their delivery. The low point value prevents them from worrying too much about their grade, while still recognizing their work. The outline prevents them from making it up on the fly.