

Levin College of Urban Affairs

Cleveland State University

Dr Robert A. Simons

Fall 2007

Syllabus: UST 893

Ph.D. Oral Discourse Seminar

Meeting Time: Tuesday, 1:00-2:50 p.m.
Place : UR 247, Urban Building, CSU
Instructor : Robert A. Simons
Phone : 687-5258 office
Email : roby@urban.csuohio.edu
Office Hours: Room UR223 Tuesday noon-1:00p.m., and by appointment

Problem statement and Context

This is a 2 credit seminar course, with enrollment capped at 6-8 Ph.D. students. Enrollment would be reserved for 2nd or 3rd year Ph.D. students with a language other than English as their mother tongue. If room permits, other Ph.D. students could also enroll. Often Ph.D. students that do not have English as a mother tongue have highly adequate test scores, high math skills, and a very strong work ethic. They also have different learning methods, often featuring memorization. They also have difficulty in expressing themselves orally (and to some degree in writing) in English. This elective course will focus on the oral part.

In a classroom setting, these students are often “hard to read”, passive, and much less likely to ask questions than other students. Even when prompted, they sometimes avoid responding, and actively avoid extended exchanges. When time comes for them to present their material orally (most typically with power point or another teaching tool), they often perform below average. When time comes for an extensive or comprehensive oral examination, they often struggle mightily, and some students suffer from culturally-based performance anxiety. Also, some foreign Ph.D. students have little real-world experience, and little familiarity with American culture, work environment, and social issues. Some students are intimidated by our direct style, and they have been brought up to be deferential to authority figures. In some cases, gender may also be an issue.

Since our profession of research and teaching is comprised of important career-defining moments including: job interviews, presenting research findings, expert witness work, etc., it is essentially a series of oral exams. Thus, we need to be more proactive in developing high-level oral presentation skills for these students. Their education here at CSU is missing an important piece: it is highly suggested that they have a chance to gain speaking these skills before the end of their time with us, preferably before their comprehensive exams. That’s where this course fits in. The whole idea is to get the

students talking, and then to get them arguing, within the appropriate scholarly paradigm.

Summary of Course Activities

At first, we would get to know each other, discover our research interests, and become comfortable talking about commonly available yet superficial topics, like newspaper articles on urban planning, public administration, current events, the environment, housing, or economics. The instructor would seek to obtain student opinions, without requirement for substantial background research, getting them to “open up” and “wing it”. It would be unacceptable to be passive or refuse to answer questions. This would cover weeks 1-3 of the course. This is Part 1 of the course.

After a few weeks of this, we would move onto a more structured series of oral discourse exercises. Since the class meets Tuesdays, the instructor would assign a scholarly article (or perhaps a professional report) to be read by all students no earlier than Monday. They would be required to read it, do some additional research on policy issues, and then come to class, at first, with a ONE PAGE summary of the issues. The instructor would then proceed, initially by consent, but soon using Socratic-style, around the class, asking individual students questions by name, on various topics related to the article. After two weeks of this, we would move to a few weeks of the same format, without the “cheat sheet” and with a shorter review time. This is Part 2 of the course, and takes us up the midway point of the semester. At this point, students need to identify a main advisor or faculty mentor that they want to work with for their dissertation or comprehensive exams.

For the last part of the course (Part 3), students would identify, along with their mentor, and approved by the instructor, two narrow topics for their individual consideration. One topic should be an article their mentor wrote, or a seminal article in their field that the mentor is very familiar with. The second item would be a potential dissertation or research topic the student and mentor would jointly define. For the first item, the student would be prepared to be examined by their mentor and by the instructor (and optionally by the Ph.D. program director) on the subject for one hour. As part of this, each student would have to answer any questions posed regarding the research item. The “panel” of faculty would first ask some straightforward, “slow pitch” questions”, then move into a faster-paced cross-examination mode. Tricky and impossible-to-answer-correctly questions are also encouraged.

Students should note that there is no shame involved, faculty has more experience than they do, and can manipulate the situation for any desired outcomes. The point is to get them used to this situation, so that when it comes up in the future any performance anxiety would be reduced, and they would be more willing to attempt answers to questions they are not sure of, and not rely on memorized responses. This “hands-on”

experience would lead to more successful oral exam outcomes. This would go on for 3-4 weeks, with each student having a one hour session, with two students examined each week. The seminar room would have a “hot seat” setup, with the featured student facing the faculty panel, and other students in a more passive, “audience” position.

For the final 3-4 weeks, each student would prepare and present a 15-30 minute formal presentation (based on their defined research interests), and then have to field questions from the faculty panel on their presentation for the remaining 45 minutes. At the end of Part 3 of the course, each student will have had two individual one hour sessions, and all the students will have watched over a dozen sessions of the other students.

Grading

Grading would be based on 10% for attendance and participation, 20% for Part 1 of the course, 30% for Part 2, and 40% for Part 3 of the course (of this, 20 points for each one hour session). The instructor will award an A to students who have showed very substantial improvement in their oral discourse skills, a B to student who have shown adequate improvement, and a C to students with poor attendance or who have not progressed in developing their skills.

Students should refer to the CSU Graduate Bulletin for administrative procedures related to drop-add, withdrawal, and incompletes.

<u>Session Number</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	8/28	COURSE CONCEPT, CLASS INTRODUCTIONS, AND STUDENT INTERESTS, INSTRUCTOR'S EXPECTATIONS, BASELINE SELF-ASSESSMENT
2	9/04	casual newspaper article review 1
3	9/11	newspaper article review 2
4	9/18	rigorous newspaper article review 3
5	9/25	scholarly article 1 with 2 day prep and 1 page notes
6	10/2	scholarly article 1 with 1 day prep and 1 page notes
7	10/9	scholarly article 1 with 1 day prep and no notes
8	10/16	scholarly article 1 with ½ day prep and no notes
9	10/23	toastmaster's session (no prep)
10	10/30	final presentations 1a and 2a
11	11/6	final presentations 3a and 4a
12	11/13	final presentations 1b and 2b
13	11/20	final presentations 3b and 4b
14	11/27	more final presentations/flex day
15	12/4	reflection and evaluation, one-on-one interviews with students