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4 Designing Informal Communication Activities

As we articulated in the first chapter, research shows that professional communication competence is a worthwhile pursuit in the classroom, given the multiple contexts outside of the classroom in which communication competence could make a difference in students' lives. Similarly, we need to recognize that students can use communication within the classroom in ways that are not necessarily limited to professional competence, but more focused on enhancing their learning experience. In our experience, when faculty members think about using oral communication in the classroom, most automatically think about the formal presentation. Yet, when you think about the important learning and critical thinking processes that occur in your classroom, you may think of classroom discussions, group lab work, and small learning groups. These also involve oral communication—just a different kind of communication than the formal presentation. These kinds of communication activities—sometimes referred to as *communication-to-learn* activities or *informal communication* activities—presume a different way of thinking about oral communication in the classroom. We prefer referring to these activities as *informal* activities, because we believe that whether formal or informal, the communication activities in the classroom are all *communication-to-learn* activities.

Informal communication activities have many benefits. For example, small learning groups of three or four people can facilitate talk because it is a safer place to try out ideas before coming to the larger group. Discussion, and experience with discussion, can desensitize individuals to public talk to some extent and decrease the threat of formal presentations. This kind of interaction enables change because it is part of an on-going transaction—thought evolves while interacting. The exposure to a diversity of skills and thinking decreases myths about what others think. It helps create a realistic comparison base because students hear and are exposed to others' work and thought. There is the potential for students to realize the equifinality of learning: the

same end can be reached in a variety of ways. Exposure to other ways of approaching ideas helps students explore multiple approaches to learning, and expands options for them. Preparing students for these kinds of activities helps students learn what is expected of them.

Although you might assume students will have the communication abilities to engage in discussions, group work, or in-class activities, many do not. Therefore, many students are unable to reap the learning benefits of the communication activity and you are left lamenting over students' lack of engagement with course content and discussions. Some of these problems will happen regardless of what you do. Yet many of these problems can be dealt with proactively. This chapter will provide you with information on designing communication activities that maximize the learning that can happen in your classroom and engage your students in skills that are important in situations outside your classroom. For example, engaging in critical analysis of problems is a crucial skill for citizen engagement, whether acting as an advocate, a facilitator, or voter. The process students go through to gather information about course requirements for a major involves skills of questioning, inquiry, research, and analysis—much of which relies on their abilities to communicate. Informal communication assignments address skills such as these. While they do not necessarily focus on helping students achieve polish as professional communicators, they help students learn to think critically, engage in course material, and learn content in deeper ways.

It is clear, though, that just talking won't aid in learning. The character of the talk matters. Webb (1982), in a series of studies on cooperative learning, has convincingly established that the character of the interaction makes a difference in individual learning. Interaction patterns differ by demographic group (e.g., male/female, age, life experience) and students' abilities to learn are influenced by ethnicity and socio-cultural background—that is, students learn better when interaction patterns are consistent with the way communication functions in their home culture (Byrd & Sims, 1987; Jordan, Au, & Joesting, 1983; More, 1987; Philips, 1983; Rhodes, 1988; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987). These kinds of activities also involve a certain degree of risk for students. While they may appear to be low risk because they may not be graded, what a student says in class does not necessarily just stay in class. A student struggling with a text or question may be subject to teasing, ridicule, disdain, or just plain impatience expressed by the peers in subtle or not-so-subtle ways. Publicly stating an opinion brings with it the possibility of responses from others that may be difficult to manage.

So what does this mean for us? If we accept that talk by students helps them learn and that the character of the talk in the classroom will make a difference in the quality of the learning, then we are obligated to help

students learn how they can use communication to engage in course material within the instructional setting. Experience with talk can contribute to the development of communicative competence, but experience alone is not enough. Students enter our classrooms with a wide variety of experiences in communicating in classroom learning activities. What counts as competent communication in one academic setting, may not be considered competent in another. Disciplines differ in terms of the types of questions they value, the norms of student interaction, the forms or reasoning, and the preferred methods for providing explanations. When students come to your class, they come with varied experiences related to these kinds of activities. Therefore, students need to be provided with examples of how to use communication in the effort of learning. In this chapter, you will find information about various informal communication activities that are intended to facilitate specific learning objectives, how to design these kinds of communication activities, and how to hold students accountable. This chapter is intended to begin the process of designing these kinds of assignments. Chapter 7 provides further information on ways to help prepare students for participation in activities such as these (specifically those that necessitate discussion). Chapter 8 looks more specifically at how to support activities that necessitate group and teamwork.

Regardless of the type of activity you are using, there are important issues related to participation in all communication activities. Student participation in informal communication activities is often seen by instructors as a low-risk process. Yet, for many students, engaging in oral communication of any form is not low risk. A student who chooses to participate in class is essentially publicly committing him or herself to a position of some sort. In doing so, participation becomes a self-disclosing activity. Face issues are always present, more relevant for some students than for others (see Chapter 13 for an extensive discussion on facework). As instructors, we are often not aware of the ramifications of a student's choice to participate. Evaluation by classmates occurs both inside and outside of class—whether we require it or not—and we often do not see the latter. Consider the assessments of faculty members made on the basis of their participation in a faculty meeting, and you will have a sense of the potentially risky nature of class discussion. Furthermore, research on participation in classrooms indicates that faculty or instructor behavior affects the extent to which students participate, as well as the quality of their participation (Webb, 2009; Webb et al., 2009). Therefore, the way in which you, as the instructor, engage in informal communication activities could influence the eventual learning outcomes of the activities themselves.

It is also important to realize that some students will experience a high degree of anxiety with any oral communication expectation—even those that are not formal public presentations. There are things one can do to help deal with high levels of communication apprehension. For example, studies have shown that multiple experiences with public speaking can help decrease public-speaking anxiety for some people. Preparation generally makes a difference in the degree of anxiety that students feel, and structuring activities that integrate a preparatory mechanism such as freewriting prior to discussion may help. Experiences with different kinds of oral communication situations can also be helpful; for example, communicating in a small group in order to prepare for a more formal presentation. Courses that focus on some aspect of oral communication that feels less threatening can help decrease anxiety in those situations perceived as more threatening. One of the best ways of dealing with communication apprehension is to experience situations where one can begin to try out and develop coping mechanisms that help. Informal communication activities can begin to do this (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of communication apprehension and for suggestions on helping students who experience a high degree of apprehension).

Finally, it is important to think about how students' past experiences might influence the communication activities you do in your class. Students may have learned "appropriate" behavior in another class, another discipline, or another group that would alienate individuals in your class. For example, what is assertive in one setting may be interpreted as grandstanding in another; qualifying one's remarks may be expected in one setting but may be interpreted as waffling in another. Gender, ethnic, racial, and cultural elements also enter into the mix. English proficiency, differences in cultural values, responses to status, the perception of status differences—all influence interaction in a group (Lee, 2009; O'Donnell, 2006; Webb, 2009). Since the dynamics of any group have a bearing upon the skills exhibited by the participants, performance of skills depends upon the pattern of interaction developing in the group as well as upon individual ability (chapters 7 and 8 provide a more extensive discussion of issues related to participation, whether in large class discussions or in teams; Chapter 10 provides information about diversity in communication activities). Part of communicative competence is developing the ability to adapt, be flexible, and be aware of multiple contextual issues, but students do not always come with those abilities, and so we believe it is important to address them up front. Therefore, even in these early stages of developing assignments, it is important to consider these issues in more detail.

There are several steps to consider when designing informal communication activities. It is important to note that not all informal activities should

look the same. Some you will do quickly, in class, with very little follow-up (other than the activity itself). Others might require students to engage in some preparation outside of class. Yet others could necessitate more detailed instructions and practice in the kinds of critical thinking skills that will facilitate learning. The way in which you design the activity will determine the kinds of information you will need to provide for students. Table 4.1 provides some planning questions to help you identify what is important in as you think about informal activities.

Table 4.1. Planning Questions: Informal Communication Activities

What learning goals are most important to your course content?
What forms of inquiry are important for your students to be able to master?
What structures of communication activities would fit best given your course constraints?
What kinds of follow-up strategies could hold students accountable for these informal activities?
What challenges do you expect your students to have with informal communication activities?
How can you proactively address these challenges in designing the activity?

The seven steps in designing informal communication activities include

- Delineating learning outcomes and forms of inquiry
- Identifying the structure of the task you want students to complete
- Articulating the particular areas of content you want students to focus on
- Designing prompts/tasks that have multiple possible responses and audiences
- Designating guidelines for interaction and potential relational issues
- Setting clear expectations for outcomes of the exercise and, if appropriate, instructions for reporting the results of the process/product
- Holding students accountable for their communication choices and behaviors in these activities.

The first step in designing informal communication activities involves thinking about what you want students to learn and what forms of inquiry you want them to engage in or practice during the activity. This decision

involves a process similar to articulating course-based outcomes and objectives but is focused at the level of this exercise or assignment. Put this activity in the context of your entire course: What particular student-learning outcomes do you want to achieve for different parts of your course? How does this activity or exercise help you achieve those outcomes at this point in your course? As mentioned in Chapter 1, many of you have probably been exposed to the taxonomy of questioning developed by Benjamin Bloom (often used when articulating students learning outcomes, as well). While Bloom's taxonomy is widely cited and is often used as a guide for developing levels of outcomes for assessment purposes, it might be helpful to use Bloom's three domains—cognitive, affective and behavioral—to guide designing communication outcomes.

Given that your goals for these communication activities will be more focused on how well students learn course content, it is likely you will be writing outcomes that focus more on cognitive and affective outcomes. You will focus on the form of the communication itself primarily as a means to achieve these ends. One way to think about the learning outcomes for activities is to consider the forms of inquiry that you want your students to engage in for this activity. Do you want them to evaluate? Interrogate? Compare? Contrast? Regardless of the final format of the exercise of assignment(s) you create, the kinds of inquiry you are expecting of your students needs to be made explicit, both to yourself and to your students. For example, if you want your students to "compare and contrast," what does that mean?

As you think about generating outcomes for informal communication activities, it is also important to consider the kinds of questions you think are important for students to ask as they participate in those activities. Students often believe that what is most important is imparting their knowledge. They need to be encouraged to ask questions—and you will need to prepare them to be able to accomplish what you are asking them to do, in part by identifying the multiple ways to approach problems, texts, and issues. There are many different kinds of questions, and it is often enlightening to students to realize these different forms. Students often get stuck at the level of asking factual/knowledge questions, never considering that there are different forms of questions that can illuminate a text or an issue. It is helpful to discuss with students the different ways of asking questions and the types of insights that might be associated with different question forms. There are many different taxonomies of question types, ranging from highly abstract categorizations to fairly mundane descriptions. We have listed typical categories here in Table 4.2, although the categories are not all mutually exclusive. Of particular note are convergent and divergent questions. There are those who assert that convergent thinking and divergent thinking utilize

different brain functions (divergent thinking utilizes the right brain, developing imaginative and creative abilities; convergent thinking utilizes the left brain, thus developing the deductive, rational, and analytic abilities (Guilford, 1967; Robinson, 2011; Runco, 1991).

Table 4.2. Types of Content-Focused Questions

Form of Question	Examples
Factual/Knowledge: To get information, open discussion, or test for knowledge	Questions that ask "who, what, why, where, and how"
Explanatory: To elicit reasoning, create an opening for further information, or to clarify a purpose or goal	"What other factors contributed to this problem?" "Why did the author use this analogy?
Leading: To introduce a new idea or focus attention on an idea introduced by someone else	"Now consider XYZ. How would these additional factors have changed your solution?"
Analytic: To focus on relationships among concepts or to break issues into smaller parts for further examination	"How does A relate to B?" "If X is true, what do we do with the fact that . . .?"
Hypothetical or Application: To focus on a potentially unpopular position, or to try out how a concept or solution would work to solve a problem or address an issue	"What would happen if...?" "Let's say we decided to....?" "Now let's change the scenario and see what happens if...."
Justification and Evaluation: To challenge old ideas, develop new ideas, or focus on reasoning and evidence	"I'd like to hear your reasons." "What observations did you make that led you to your conclusions?" "Does this solution meet our criteria?"

Table 4.3. Questions to Expand Ways of Thinking

Form of Question	Examples
Disjunctive: To clarify alternatives or show problems with oversimplification	"Of the two most likely possibilities, which is preferable?" "If A is not the answer, then what must the answer be?"
Convergent: To develop accuracy, think deductively, develop consensus, move toward action, or direct attention to specific elements	"Based on our information, what conclusions can we draw?" "Where are the points of overlap?" "Where do we agree?"
Divergent: To develop open-minded thinking, discover new ways of approaching an issue, show connection, focus attention on many elements	"How else might we approach this?" "If you were to research this topic, how would you proceed?"

The second step is to clearly identify the structure of the task. Given what you are trying to accomplish at this point in your course, as well as the character of students in your course, does it make sense to use a more or less structured exercise? Will you have students do small-group discussions in order to try to gain insight into a text? How structured do these small-group discussions need to be? What kind of preparation will students need in order to be ready to ask the kinds of questions that will lead to insight, and be able to talk intelligently in response (for example, reading the text, preparing discussion questions, freewriting, journal-writing, outlining essential arguments)? Will this be an in-class debate? Micro presentations? Poster presentation? Discussion? Role play? Pair-and-share (see example at the end of this chapter)? Will the task be completed fully in class or will there need to be preparation work or follow up work outside of class? How much class time will you devote to the activity and how much out-of-class time (if any) will students need to devote to the preparation and/or follow-up?

The third step is to identify the content with which they will work. Is it a particular text? A chapter in the book? Their own opinions? Web-based research they will do during the activity? Experiential events? Clearly specifying the content they need to have read, found, experienced, generated, or

otherwise prepared will make the process more efficient and will help students prepare.

Fourth, you will need to design prompts that lead to multiple responses and that have varied audiences. A prompt that has one right answer will likely not lead to discussion, and students will likely find the process to be one of busy work. The best communication tasks/prompts have a breadth of possible answers and responses (see Chapter 7, Class Discussion, for more information on question-asking). Ideally, prompts should encourage students to look for answers, but also lead students to even more questions. For example, if you are having students engage in a mock psychological client role-play, use multiple psychological problems in the plays and perhaps each "client" brings to the role-play a different psychological profile. There needs to be room for true inquiry, with openness for discovery. If there is a "right" answer, then inquiry might be "how did you get there?" Such an approach will help explicate the methods of your discipline, surfacing how inquiry works.

Fifth, designate guidelines for interaction and consider relational issues that might emerge. How much time will you give students? Will they leave class or stay in the classroom? Will you ask one person to be a recorder? Is the material controversial? Is it likely that participants may become angry, concerned, fearful of potentially offending others in the class, or be reminded of difficulties in their own life? How will you address these possibilities (see Section III for discussions of approaches to these kinds of difficult situations)?

Sixth, articulate clear expectations for the outcomes of the exercise. Students need to know what they are aiming for; provide that direction by giving instructions for reporting products and processes. Depending on how you structure your exercise, not every student has to talk every time. Nor do students have to turn something in. For example, the outcome of an exercise may be one student from a small group reporting back to the class for a large class discussion on the section of the text assigned to that group. Yet another outcome might be for students to identify possible paper topics as a result of the discussion.

Finally, when designing informal communication activities, you need to consider how you will hold students accountable for the process. Will you do a post-exercise debriefing? Will you help students identify and articulate the content they have learned? How will you do so? What kinds of feedback will you provide, and based on what criteria? Will there be peer feedback? Will your feedback be connected to a grade? Will students self-reflect on their own oral communication choices and behaviors? How will you facilitate that self-reflection? Will you use rubrics? If so, what kind of rubric and what elements need to be included? The important issue to know at this point is that holding students accountable should not translate into heavy

grading for these kinds of informal communication activities. Rather, you are helping them discern how their communication behaviors relate to their learning. You can easily use part of your participation grade for these kinds of activities. For example, you could have 10 percent of your course grade focused on participation, in which students get points for either attendance or for turning in some form of product from multiple communication activities (e.g., an index card reporting group processes, a one-minute paper indicating learning reflections, etc.). The key here is accountability for learning, not evaluation of the communication itself. Identify efficient processes for giving feedback that focus entirely on the learning. If you design a rubric, keep it simple, short and focused on the learning goals and processes you want for your students. Table 4.4 illustrates some examples of how to hold students accountable without creating excessive grading.

Table 4.4. Holding Students Accountable for Informal Communication Activities

Accountability Schema	Example Related Activities
Full credit if completed	*Sociology*: Group problem-solution discussion; group presentation of an example sociological problem *Astronomy*: Full class working to sort pictures into moon phases; role-play of timeline of astronomical understanding *Plant Pathology*: Sharing of a specimen with brief explanation; engagement with lab partner
Rated 1–3 on criteria such as clear interpretation, evidence-based argument	*English*: short analysis of a poem followed by a reflection; in-class debate about some aspect of a text (e.g., the true motivation of a character) *Art*: Oral presentation of a piece of art with interpretation; in-class discussion comparing different periods or different pieces of art *History*: Discussion comparing two accounts of the same event
Rated 0 or 1 on whether a particular aspect is present	*Engineering*: Individual demonstration of lab protocol; progress presentations of a design project *Psychology*: Group discussion of relevance of characteristics to a diagnosis; group presentation of a possible interpretation of a case study *Nursing*: Role plays of specific patient interactions

Template for Informal Communication and Activity Design

In this section, we provide several informal communication activities and an activity-design template (Figure 4.1) to use as you think about using informal communication activities in your classroom. This template can be thought of as a way to think through designing these kinds of informal communication activities and to structure the oral instructions that you give in class. Or, for more complex activities, you can use this template to design a written prompt (in a handout, PowerPoint, or on chalkboard) and then create a handout that deals with the additional complexities.

We have situated the following examples in particular disciplines so you can get a flavor of how they might be used for different content areas. Any of these examples, though, can be adapted to your own content and discipline. Not only can you adapt the content, though, but you can also adapt the timing and structure of the activity. For example, if you want to extend an activity beyond a single class period, you can break it up into discrete tasks. Or, if you want to shorten an activity based on time constraints, you can choose to adapt the prompt for your context. The point is that you get to decide how to implement these activities based on your goals, desired learning outcomes, and contextual constraints. We provide examples in six general categories: micro presentations, in-class debates, pair/group work, discussion, dialogue/role plays, and visual/poster presentations. We also provide examples of discussion-based exercises (an analysis of Romeo & Juliet, and the Gallery Walk) as they might be presented to students in order to illustrate how an assignment created by utilizing the template might be presented to students when implementing the assignment in class.

Activity Title
Course Name/Number

Class Date(s):
[Provide the in-class day(s) of the activity and/or preparation dates as appropriate to give students an idea of the complexity of the activity.]

During this activity, you will...
[This initial statement should tell students the learning outcomes you have for the activity as well as the forms of inquiry they will need to engage in during the activity.]

Your task in this activity is to...
[Provide students with an idea about the structure of the activity or task. You will also indicate if there are varied audiences/roles/ or cases you want students to address (in different groups or pairs). Additionally, you should provide students with any particular guidelines for interaction that are important to the activity (e.g., time on task, selection of groups or teams, etc.).].

To complete this activity you will need to focus on...
[Outline the key areas of content the activity will focus on and where students are expected to get that content, as well as any preparation they will need to do out of class with that content.].

At the end of this activity...
[Provide students with instructions for reporting out (e.g., designated group speaker, rotating speakers) and any products that need to accompany the reporting out (e.g., written summary, visual, etc.)].

You will be accountable for...
[In this section, you will tell students the ways in which you will hold them accountable for the learning in this activity, if any].

Instructional Logistics:

As you plan, be sure to note any particular logistical considerations (e.g., what students need to have completed ahead of time, the amount of time the activity or assignment will take). This template can be used to help you consider the oral instructions you will give to students, the PowerPoint prompt you will put up, or the handout you will design (depending on the complexity of the activity).

Figure 4.1. Template for Informal Communication Activities

Analysis of Romeo & Juliet
English
Rotating Discussion Leaders

During this activity, you will work with a partner to do a close analysis of the text Romeo and Juliet in an attempt to understand the story from Shakespeare's perspective. In order to do this, you will need to explain and justify decisions about plot, characters, and intent using the text as evidence. You must read the play before class.

Choose one of the following prompts and discuss it with your partner. Discuss the question in the prompt for 10 minutes, using evidence from the text. We will then come back together as a large group. I will ask one person to volunteer to be a discussion leader for the first prompt. After discussing that prompt, the discussion leader will give the discussion "baton" (rolled up newspaper) to another person who will pick the next prompt on the list.

1. Assume you and several friends have been listening to the opening scene of Romeo and Juliet. You have been laughing during the early minutes, and that has disturbed your friends who contend this is a tragedy. Go over this early section and explain just why the early speeches and action are funny.
2. Another friend is simply confused about what is happening up through the Prince's speech. "There are too many characters to get anything straight," she contends. Untangle the confusion for your friend. To help her, explain how the scene begins to characterize Benvolio and Tybalt and introduces potential themes to be developed in future action.
3. Your friends have been awaiting the appearance of Romeo, but when he first comes on stage, they react negatively and their attitudes don't change as they hear him in scenes 2 and 4. Are they reacting as Shakespeare would want them to? Just how is Shakespeare presenting Romeo in these scenes? What's your evidence for your response? We see Juliet only briefly in Scene 3, but from what others say about her and how she reacts, what should be our first impression of her?
4. Benvolio, Mercutio, and the Nurse are important secondary characters. We meet Benvolio in Scenes 1,2, and 4; Mercutio in Scene 4, and the Nurse in Scene 3. How to their speeches characterize them? Note especially Mercutio's Queen Mab speech and the Nurse's anecdote about young Juliet. In what ways are Mercutio and the Nurse alike?.

There will be material from this discussion on the next exam.

Figure 4.2. Sample Informal Communication Activity (Rotating Discussion). Adapted from an exercise created by created by Professor George Vane, Hamline University.

Analysis of Romeo & Juliet English
Informal Communication Activity (Less Structured)

During this activity, you will work with a group of 4 or 5 people to do a close analysis of ***Romeo and Juliet*** in an attempt to understand the story from Shakespeare's perspective. In order to do this, you will need to explain and justify decisions about plot, characters, and intent using the text as evidence. You must read the play before class.

Each group will focus on one of the questions posed below. Before you start talking, take 5 minutes to free write. At the end of 5 minutes, discuss the question with the other members of your group, keeping track of the points the group members make, and how the text supports those points. What additional questions emerge from your discussion? Keep track of these too.

1. Assume you and several friends have been listening to the opening scene of Romeo and Juliet. You have been laughing during the early minutes, and that has disturbed your friends who contend this is a tragedy. Go over this early section and explain just why the early speeches and action are funny.
2. Another friend is simply confused about what is happening up through the Prince's speech. "There are too many characters to get anything straight," she contends. Untangle the confusion for your friend. To help her, explain how the scene begins to characterize Benvolio and Tybalt and introduces potential themes to be developed in future action.
3. Your friends have been awaiting the appearance of Romeo, but when he first comes on stage, they react negatively and their attitudes don't change as they hear him in scenes 2 and 4. Are they reacting as Shakespeare would want them to? Just how is Shakespeare presenting Romeo in these scenes? What's your evidence for your response? We see Juliet only briefly in Scene 3, but from what others say about her and how she reacts, what should be our first impression of her?
4. Benvolio, Mercutio, and the Nurse are important secondary characters. We meet Benvolio in Scenes 1,2, and 4; Mercutio in Scene 4, and the Nurse in Scene 3. How to their speeches characterize them? Note especially Mercutio's Queen Mab speech and the Nurse's anecdote about young Juliet. In what ways are Mercutio and the Nurse alike?.

After 15 minutes all groups will report back to the class as a whole, in order to highlight the points you discovered, and to identify additional questions that came up for the group. These reports will help guide the large class discussion.

Consider the questions that emerge from each group. What further perspectives or questions do you have? How might these provide you with a thesis for a paper analyzing this play?

Figure 4.3. Sample Informal Communication Activity (Less Structured). Exercise created by Professor George Vane, Hamline University.

Gallery Walk
Geoscience
Class Activity Dates: Monthly
(September 15, October 12, and November 10)

There are five stations set up around the room (see poster board with "STATION #" on it). During this activity, you will get into groups of 5 and place yourself at a "Home Station." You will notice that each station has at it large posters with questions on them taped to the wall (there are 5 posters at each station, each with the same question on them; but each station has different questions). You will start at your home station and, as a team, discuss answers to the questions and writes those answers on the poster provided. After 5 minutes, I will say "rotate." At that point, fold your poster so that the next team cannot see your answers and move (clockwise) to the next station. You will continue rotating until you reach "Home Station" (having gone through all stations). During the activity, I will circulate around the classroom and clarify any questions you have or address any misconceptions that you have about the content. You will be allowed to refer to course materials during the Gallery Walk, but be warned that the time at each station is so short that it will be best if you review materials on the topic of the day prior to the Gallery Walk.

At the end of the activity, your group (having returned to "Home Station") will need to-as a group—synthesize the answers to the questions and make an oral presentation (3-4 minutes long). Prepare one visual to use during your micro presentation and hand in that visual at the end of class.

Station #1: What are the effects of weather on the following systems a) transportation b) agricultural c) forestry d) banking systems.
Station #2: Outline typical temperature and wind direction patterns before and after the passage of a cold front.
Station #3: Given the passage of warm front, how would you dress your five year old for school? An elderly person for a doctor's visit? How would you explain these decisions to the elderly person or five-year old?
Station #4: Consider these cities: City A, at 8000 ft. elevation, is located on the windward side of an island at 2° S near the middle of a large ocean. City B, at 44°N, is located on a 500 ft. plateau on the lee (downwind) side of a 14,000 ft. mountain range and is over 1000 miles from the nearest water body. Explain the climate of these cities relative to latitude, altitude, continentality, mountains.
Station #5: How is weather discussed in your three favorite songs (any genre)? List specific lyrics.
Station #6: Prepare a list of criteria for reducing the risk of heat related illness for inner city elderly. Prioritize the list and justify your rating.

Figure 4.4. Sample Informal Communication Activity Template (Gallery Walk). Adapted from: http://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/gallerywalk/examples.html

Tables 4.5 through 4.10 provide examples of informal communication activities, potential student learning outcomes relevant to the activities, and sample prompts from various disciplines. We begin with the less structured approaches that are typically found in various forms of informal communication activities, in both large and small groups. It is important to note that the prompts are short examples and might or might not be sufficient for the particular communication activity, depending on the way in which you have designed the task. You will still need to think about additional guidelines for the activity and ways to hold students accountable. As they stand, though, the sample activities are meant to provide you with ideas that will stimulate your thinking. Following the examples in Tables 4.5–4.10, we provide the extended samples of a discussion-based communication activities that illustrate how to flesh out a basic idea into a more complex activity.

Table 4.5. Sample Discussion-Based Informal Communication Activities

	Learning Outcome/ Form of Inquiry	Example Activity
Large-Class Discussion	Consider multiple perspectives or alternatives; extend benefits of a small-group or individual task	Discuss, as a class, different views on an issue (e.g., in astronomy, the origin of the universe). Explore evidence for different perspectives and have students examine what aspects of their background affect their views (e.g., religious views; skeptical nature).
Small-Group Discussions	Consider responses to texts; clarify personal views	Have individuals free write responses to a scenario related to previous material or readings. Students then discuss reactions in a group, then share the group's insights to facilitate large class discussion.
Connections	Connect course material with non-classroom events.	Ask students to bring in one example from contemporary culture that connects with the readings for the day (e.g., newspaper article, YouTube video, blog). Use these examples to start discussion about the topic.
Benefit/ Drawback Discussion	Explore topics from multiple perspectives	In preparation for discussing multiple perspectives on an issue or event, have students begin by identifying their own position and the rationale for that view. As a class, discuss the multiple perspectives, focused on generating discussion rather than arriving at a "correct" answer.

Table 4.6. Sample Micro Presentation Informal Communication Activities

	Learning Outcome/ Form of Inquiry	Example Activity
Article Evaluation	Critically analyze texts	Using an issue from a local or national newspaper, have students evaluate the article in relation to a class topic (e.g., content, persuasiveness, evidence used). Random students will present 3–4 minutes to start class.
Defending your Ground	Use reason in argumentation	Have students take a position on an assertion relevant to a class topic. Give students time to jot down notes in defense of their position to present (2–3 minutes) to a specific audience (e.g., potential employers)
Myth or Reality?	Critically evaluate sources	Provide pairs of students with website links to a variety of sources that have varied levels of credibility (spoof websites work as well). Each pair should prepare a two-minute oral review and analysis of the website to be used in an upcoming student newsletter podcast.
Cost/Benefit Analysis	Articulate complexities of solving problems	Have students research one example solution proposed to a problem relevant to your disciple. Each student should prepare a two-minute presentation in which the student argues the relative benefits and costs of this particular solution.

Table 4.7. Sample In-Class Debate Activities

	Learning Outcome/ Form of Inquiry	Example Activity
Justifying Actions	Synthesize research in persuasive manner	Tell students that they have been asked to provide justification for an action/decision relevant to the course content (e.g., in soil science, the use of pesticides at schools and parks). Divide students into "pro" and "con" teams. Each team should synthesize relevant research to support the assigned side.
Summit on the Issues	Generate evidence-driven claims and counter-arguments	Assign students (individually or as pairs) a particular group who may be affected by an issue (e.g., in a course on world health issues, assign countries; in a course on education, assign parents, teachers, or administrators, etc.). Students then prepare research on a particular issue (e.g., health problems; standards-based funding for schools) and each group presents their arguments and is given the opportunity to present counterarguments to other groups.
Sensitizing Arguments	Generate arguments without personal attacks	In teams, have students provide arguments for or against a prompt that has very real implications for various groups of people (e.g., in Kinesiology, better physical education curricula could solve obesity epidemics). Have students support claims with evidence while also being sensitive to how various groups might hear arguments (e.g., how obese people may hear arguments about obesity).

Table 4.8. Sample Dialogue and Role Plays

	Learning Outcome/ Form of Inquiry	Example Activity
Beyond Being Right	Gain empathy for different views	Have students create a hypothetical dialogue between 2–3 people who disagree about a topic and have a stake in being "right" (e.g., in a case about vaccination: a doctor, a mom, and a child). Dialogues should move past stances to the complexities of the problem. Students should come prepared to speak the dialogue.
Role Reversals	Understand various audience needs	Ask students to prepare a role play where 2–3 people would have a stake in an issue. Students will role play the discussion and switch between different perspectives.
Voting in the "Greatest"	Understand contributions of various scholars	Groups of students should prepare a role play of a reality TV show in which the host is interviewing key scholars in your discipline—each of whom wants to be named "The Greatest." The host and scholars should focus on eliciting reasons for why each should get the viewers' votes.
Interrogation Interview	Position with evidence	Have students prepare to participate in an interview with the local public radio station on a current issue relevant to course content. Students should do research in preparation to be either interviewer or interviewee.

Table 4.9. Sample Pair/Group Work

	Learning Outcome/ Form of Inquiry	Example Activity
Translating Theories	Difficult material into understand-able language	Each group will be given a theory or relevant construct. The group's task is to generate an explanation of the theory that could be understood by a third grade class while being sure to do justice to the theory.
Group Decision Responses	Collaborate about a controversial issue	Each pair will pick a prompt from a bowl that includes a statement about what should (not) happen or the value placed upon an action (e.g., math standards are disastrously low in primary education). Students should take individual time to respond, then talk with the partner to come to an agreed upon response.
Gallery Walk	Brainstorm various answers to com-mon questions	Assign each team to one station around the room as a starting point (e.g., 6 sta-tions in the room). At each station, there is a question relevant to a current class topic (e.g., what can be done to reduce the risk of heat related illness for inner city elderly). Teams should brainstorm answers to the question and write them on the poster provided. After five min-utes, teams will rotate to the next station. When teams return to their home sta-tion, their task as a team is to generate a coherent synthesis of the responses on the paper.

Table 4.10. Sample Visual Activities

	Learning Outcome/ Form of Inquiry	Example Activity
Seeing the Problem	Principles into understandable visuals	Advanced Algebra: Individuals or groups should construct a visual that explains the basics of some course principle(s) to be presented to middle schoolers. Students should also prepare a 5-minute presentation explaining the visual.
Visual Results	Observations in new, compelling ways	Provide students with a set of data and/or relevant basic charts (e.g., bar charts). Have students represent the same data in a more compelling visual manner that relates to the content of the data.
Team Development	Cohesiveness in proj-ect teams	When students form groups for a project, have them discuss their team's mission and identity. Have each team generate a visual logo for the team that represents who they want to be and how they want to be perceived throughout the project.
Theory Quarters	Theoretical princi-ples with different modalities	Tell students they have been asked by the Department of Treasury to design a quarter (twenty-five cents) that repre-sents a major era or school of thought studied. Have students design the quarter to illustrates key beliefs and assumptions. Students can share their designs with the class; alternatively, have students try to identify other students' eras and provide rationale for their guess.

Conclusion

Research shows that the active involvement of students facilitates learning. Oral communication activities additionally require that students process their learning in ways that makes it available for others. While in this chapter, we have focused on activities that primarily intend to facilitate learning of course content as distinct from learning specific communication skills; activities that are intended to help develop communication skills will also enhance learning of course content. The next chapter discusses approaches when your priority is also the development of more formal communication competencies.

5 Designing Formal Communication Assignments

One of the reasons faculty often choose to incorporate communication in their classrooms is that they want to help students develop competencies that will benefit them in the workplace, or other contexts they might encounter outside of the classroom (e.g., as a public citizen). Designing assignments that meet such goals requires a different way of thinking about oral communication than we discussed in Chapter 4. In informal communication activities, communication works as a means of learning content, but when your goals and outcomes involve increasing students' communication competence (explicitly), assignments tend to be more structured and formal. While success in informal communication activities is driven by the extent to which students interrogate material or engage in content, more formal communication assignments have an added layer of expectations focusing on the extent to which students' communication performance is effective and appropriate given the context.

Yet, as we mentioned earlier in the book, what counts as effective and appropriate—as competence—varies across contexts, workplaces, and disciplines (as we have already mentioned). For example, in architecture, an effective communicator might need to be visually logical in their presentation of the actual design in order to achieve the goal of having the audience understand the design. In contrast, an effective communicator in engineering might need to be visually efficient in their presentation of the design. In public health, an appropriate strategy to help an audience make a decision about a particular campaign might be to incorporate detailed descriptions of particular issues, whereas in computer science, getting an audience to make a decision about a particular proposal might require a big-picture framework without the details. In a local township, competence could be judged by a citizen's ability to synthesize diverse voices, using experiential examples to create emotional appeals about a new housing development. In a large city school board, competence could mean providing statistical evidence for a new school reassignment plan. In these examples, competence is locally negotiated and defined within the relational and situational context of the