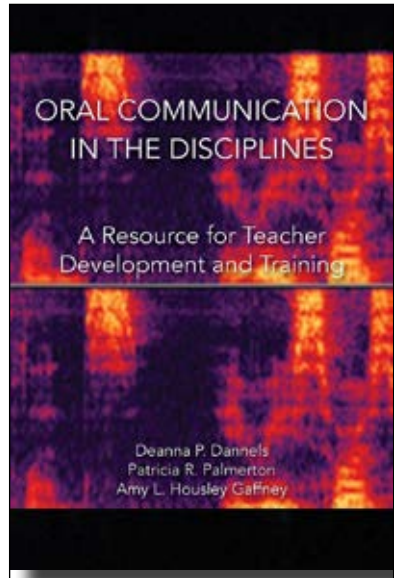


Review

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Dannels, Deanna P., Patricia R. Palmerton, and Amy L. H. Gaffney. *Oral Communication in the Disciplines: A Resource for Teacher Development and Training*. Parlor Press, 2017. (\$32; 252 pp., paperback)



WAC scholars have long argued that writing pedagogy serves students in two ways. First, through engaging with writing, students can more deeply learn the content knowledge of a discipline or field (e.g., Emig, 1977; Mayher, Lester, and Pradl, 1983; Applebee, 1985). Second, in considering writing as a situated practice, students can begin asking how the communities they belong to (or wish to enter) write (e.g., Russell, 1997; Thaiss and Zawacki, 2006; Deane and O'Neill, 2011).

CAC scholars further broadened WAC's mission to include a wider range of communicative forms, including writing in addition to oral, visual, and electronic forms of communication (Reiss, Selfe, and Young, 1998; Dannels, 2001; Duffelmeyer and Elletson, 2005; Vrchota and Russell, 2013). Building on this research, in *Oral Communication in the Disciplines: A Resource for Teacher Development and Training*, Deanna P. Dannels, Patricia R. Palmerton, and Amy L. Housley Gaffney take up oral communication in the non-communication course, arguing that oral communication literacy is exigent in higher education and a valuable facet in the professional preparation of students across disciplines. Informed by their expansive expertise in communication, administration, and rhetoric, they offer instructors a clear blueprint to the development of oral communication activities and assignments situated in existing content goals and disciplinary communities.

Throughout the book, the authors model a clear approach to curricular design that expands faculty knowledge of oral communication in addition to a general understanding of integrated course design. Accompanying this approach is a robust collection of examples from across the disciplines. The easy-to-follow frame for

assignment design (described in further detail below) illustrates that this book could be picked up by instructors with little knowledge of communication and varying levels of teaching experience to create meaningful oral communication activities and assignments in their courses. In all, this book offers instructors commonsense but theoretically informed approaches and detailed assignment examples for integrating oral communication in their courses. In devoting an entire book to deeply focusing on oral communication pedagogy, the authors argue that student success in and beyond college is supported by one's ability to effectively communicate orally.

Dannels, Palmerton, and Gaffney take a contextualized, rhetorical approach to oral communication literacy within the disciplines, asking readers to reflect on "what counts as a competent communicator in [their] course or discipline?" (p. 11). The book is written to serve an audience outside of communications and is pragmatic and pedagogical (as its title implies). Chapter one explains concepts like writing-to-learn; communication-to-learn; communication literacy; and goals-based, discipline-specific curriculum development. The authors argue that integrating oral communication alongside learning processes can lead to deeper engagement and comprehension for students, that industry partners identify a lack of oral literacy in new employees and value oral ability generally, and that oral literacy can foster more universal abilities like engaged citizenship (p. 6–9). Chapter two introduces the framing for the rest of the book, which is meant to walk the reader—perhaps an instructor hesitant about integrating oral communication in their course—through the act of designing, delivering, and assessing communications activities that forward the existing outcomes in their courses. The authors outline a five-part frame that includes considering local and disciplinary contexts, identifying course outcomes and asking how oral communication might encourage these outcomes, designing informal activities and more formal assignments that support oral literacy, supporting students and anticipating challenges related to oral communication tasks, and responding to and assessing oral communication in a disciplinary context outside of communications.

In designing curricula, Dannels, Palmerton, and Gaffney employ a model that looks much like integrated course design (Fink, 2003), and, therefore, begins by asking readers to consider their local and disciplinary contexts as well as the outcomes for their particular courses. While these chapters align oral communication literacy to institutional goals, they also speak to hesitancies instructors might have towards oral communication in the classroom such as a lack of class time, instructor labor, a fear of not having communication expertise, class size, and a question about whether oral communication will be just another passing fad in institutional initiatives (p. 28–33). For WAC administrators, these hesitancies most likely stir feelings of *déjà vu* paralleling the many reasons instructors in the disciplines are reluctant to integrate writing activities in their courses. Responding to these hesitancies, the authors, then,

explain the benefits of oral communications integration, such as its promotion of critical thinking, problem solving, and student-centered pedagogy as well as its role in disciplinary professionalization. However, they assert several times throughout the text that “[i]f particular activities or assignments do not help” with “achiev[ing] your course goals and outcomes [. . .] don’t use them” (p. 37). By showing how oral communication can integrate with content and learning goals, the authors break down assumptions that disciplinary faculty often carry about WAC/WID/CAC programs: that communication development will be yet another thing they have to do in classes on top of content instruction. Instead, the authors refocus readers on how oral communication can further existing learning goals.

Chapters four and five walk the reader through informal activity and formal assignment design. The design process has seven steps:

1. Delineate learning outcomes and forms of inquiry
2. Identify the structure of the task you want students to complete
3. Articulate the particular areas of content you want students to focus on
4. Design prompts/tasks that have multiple possible responses and audiences
5. Designate guidelines for interaction and potential relational issues
6. Set clear expectations for outcomes of the exercise and, if appropriate, instructions for reporting the results of the process/product
7. Hold students accountable for their communication choices and behaviors in these activities. (p. 47)

Then, the authors break down each of the steps, offering examples of oral communication assignments in development through each stage. These examples are particularly helpful to instructors interested in beginning to integrate oral communication in their courses but unsure of where to begin or instructors looking to freshen up existing activities and assignments. They range in disciplinary and course contexts, offering readers a glimpse into what is possible.

Chapters six through ten explain the assistance students might need in completing oral communication tasks. The authors begin by tackling the common fears or apprehensions students might have related to speaking in public settings—even through informal speaking activities—as well as some strategies for managing this apprehension empathetically. Chapters seven and eight deeply focus on the two most common communication tasks: class discussion and group work. For instructors already using discussion and group work, these chapters explain how scaffolding and explicit expectations can yield more engaging experiences for students and instructors. They begin by stating that expectations for these tasks “vary dramatically” from one course to the next; therefore, a students’ previous experiences with class discussion or group

work might conflict with “what we expect [...] in our own classes” (121). Students’ social and cultural norms, they state, can similarly shape students’ oral communication in the classroom.¹ In supporting students’ various points of entry, the authors suggest instructors take the same rhetorical, situated approach with clearly identified expectations at the beginning of a communication task and deliberate scaffolding throughout that task. Chapter nine gives instructors strategies for dealing with common, yet difficult, class situations related to oral communication tasks: aggression or disrespect in classroom discussion, group conflicts, and vulnerable moments that can arise when students are interacting with individuals who have different ideas, beliefs, and behaviors than themselves. In moments where instructors might be rendered speechless or unsure of how to respond, the authors offer valuable starting points for response.

The final section tackles evaluation: this section is helpful for thinking more critically about how assessment tools can be developed in alignment with outcomes. It begins by encouraging instructors to focus only on the aspects of oral communication that are directly related to an assignment’s learning goals (p. 175). Just as with the chapters on assignment design, the authors provide a range of example evaluations; however, they largely rely on rubrics and scoring guides as the tools for evaluating student work. The authors, furthermore, detail how to frame feedback to reach students using Feedback Intervention Theory, which focuses on “meta-task features,” “the learning of the tasks,” and “reducing the feedback standard gap” while respecting students’ desires to “act independently” (214). The strategies given here can easily move into written and visual forms of evaluation, giving instructors more knowledge of feedback and response strategies writ large.

In evaluating this book, my greatest critique is that in crafting a straightforward book that is readable for a general audience, the authors gloss over what are sometimes messy and complicated aspects to curricular design and assessment. This is most clearly seen in the assessment section, which flattens assessment to focus heavily on a particular assessment tool, rubrics. In a book that gives instructors so much agency in choosing and designing assignments, a more comprehensive range of assessment options would have been a nice addition. Instead of situating a rubric as one of many possible tools for assessment, in their description of the process of developing an assessment tool, the authors label this step simply as “create rubrics” (174). An entire chapter subsequently follows explaining how to choose which type of rubric might match an instructor’s assignment design. From an authorial perspective, this might be a streamlined choice: instructors will want to know how to assess their students’ oral communication tasks; rubrics will get the job done and are widely

1. It is important to note that the authors do not take up students’ disabilities that impact oral instruction in these pages.

accepted. However, assessment scholars in writing studies have shown rubrics to be problematic in that they misrepresent the assessment process as easily definable and can lead to more rigid interpretations of what success on an assignment looks like (Wilson, 2006; Kohn, 2006; Inoue, 2015; Cirio, 2019). In the context of this text, rubrics are largely presented as the main option for assessing oral communication tasks and are never questioned or problematized.

This single concern is offset by the largely good work being done by Dannels, Palmerton, and Gaffney in this book. For faculty interested in expanding the oral communication offerings in their courses, this text can take them from conceptualization to delivery and assessment with approachable frameworks and multiple examples. For administrators who want to offer faculty a straightforward resource or introduce oral communication tasks into the contexts of a professional development program (such as a reading group or workshop), *Oral Communication in the Disciplines: A Resource for Teacher Development and Training* is a valuable resource. Besides being helpful and straightforward, it articulates the importance of oral communication in the professionalization and preparation of students across the disciplines. If WAC programs want to prepare students to be effective communicators, they must be forwarding all forms of communication, including oral communication.

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