

How to Speak Up in Class

A WORK-IN-PROGRESS BY PROF. JENNA HARTEL

Over the years I have noticed that students are hesitant to speak up in class. For example, when I ask for comments or questions about the readings and/or lecture, there can be a resounding silence. This is always surprising and disappointing, since everyone accepted into our program is bright, articulate, and opinionated. What is more, learning is better and more fun when many perspectives are voiced. Perhaps social anxiety gets the best of people at these moments. The reluctance to speak up may also simply stem from not knowing *how* to do so. Online, there are guides to class participation but they lack details and examples, and may not apply to Library and Information Science classroom. What follows is my own effort, with the help of Teaching Assistants, to convey “How to Speak Up in Class.” You may be surprised at how simple it can be! Keep in mind that these instructions may not apply to other professors and their class discussions, though you could always give these strategies a try.

At some point during a lecture, I may pause, turn to the class and say: “What do you think? Does anyone have questions or comments about this?” This broad invitation is your opportunity to speak up. For starters, I do *not* expect you to say something like:

“Well, I disagree with Shera entirely. His lofty vision for social epistemology points the library in an overly collectivist direction, when our history is actually more rooted in customized service to the individual—much closer to Dewey’s pragmatism.”

Yikes! I find it highly unlikely that being in your first year, reading one or two articles, or listening to part of a lecture, would leave any student in a position to say something like that! (It sounds like you should be *teaching* the class.) What is more, this is not the type of comment that helps with the shared project of group understanding, since it likely leaves many peers behind. Rather, in my opinion, a great spoken contribution to class is *short, simple, personal, honest, and unpretentious*. It should not last more than one sentence or two. What follows are verbal strategies and examples; feel free to use these anytime.

- **Provide a straight-forward qualitative assessment of your experience of the article or idea.** For example, “I loved this article! I liked it because...” or, “I hated this article! I think it failed to...” Believe it or not, it is even helpful to say, “This assigned reading made no impression on me, and I can’t even explain why...!” for this comment may spur one of your peers to put words to exactly the issue you sensed.
- **Recap your understanding of the material and seek confirmation.** For example, “Let me make sure I understand correctly: In ‘Invisible Substrate,’ Bates does not favor the

dictionary definition of information science; instead, she prefers to focus on less explicit qualities of the field. Is that right?"

- **Relate the article or idea to your own personal experience.** For example, "This reminds me of the first time I walked into a library..." or, "This doesn't ring true to me. Each time I search the library catalogue, I..."
- **Connect the article or idea to something in popular culture that is likely to resonate with everyone.** "That's exactly what Parker Posey did in 'Party Girl..." or "The article made me think of *fake news*, and the role librarians play in public discourse."
- **In a simple fashion, connect the dots between the assigned readings, or the readings and the lecture, or the material from one week to the next.** For example, "I can see how this week's assigned reading presented a positive view, whereas the lecture offers a more skeptical spin." or "Two weeks ago the focus seemed to be technology. Now this week the emphasis is on face-to-face engagement with library patrons. Is it one, the other, or both?"
- **Bring in material from other courses.** For example, "The reading implies that communication is all that matters in a reference interview. But in the course Knowledge Organization, search skills seem to be the key."
- **Enhance or provide a contrast with a peer's remarks.** For example, "I appreciate what s/he says, but I feel the opposite..." or "Well, that makes two of us!" or "Building on what my colleague just said..."

This handout is a work-in-progress that is being tested for the first time in Fall 2017. Your input is most welcome. Thank you.