

**And the Award Goes To...**

**Celebrating Excellence & Increasing Audience Engagement through Student Choice Awards**

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**Introduction and Need for Innovation**

Public speaking courses often emphasize delivery, structure, and persuasion but provide limited opportunities for authentic audience feedback or peer-driven evaluation (Morreale et al., 2017). Research suggests that incorporating active audience participation enhances both engagement and retention (Lucas, 2019). When intentionally structured, peer feedback and innovative evaluation practices promote critical listening skills and deepen students’ understanding of rhetorical effectiveness (van Ginkel et al., 2019). Within the context of agricultural communication, fostering these skills helps students engage diverse audiences with empathy and evidence-based persuasion (Andolina & Conklin, 2018).

The Student Choice Awards approach was developed to create a more interactive, real-world environment where students assume the dual roles of speaker and evaluator. The innovation situates persuasion within an authentic communicative experience, promoting key tenets of experiential learning and learner-centered pedagogy such as personal agency, reflection, and community building (Kolb, 2015; Weimer, 2013).

**How It Works**

The innovative teaching strategy was implemented in an undergraduate class focusing on developing presentation and group facilitation skills. Following a unit on persuasive communication, students developed a 5–7-minute presentation to sell a product or service, using narrative, evidence, and emotional appeal. On presentation days, students rotated among presenters and completed a structured peer feedback form with Likert-scale and open-ended questions, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** *Peer Evaluation Rubric for Persuasive Presentations*

	SD	D	A	SA
The presentation convinced me that this product or service is worth buying.				
The speaker(s) used strong storytelling, examples, or visuals that helped me connect with the message.				
The speaker(s) were confident, organized, and maintained good eye contact and vocal delivery.				
The overall message was clear, engaging, and memorable.				
After listening to the presentation, I would consider purchasing the product or service.				

*Scale:* SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

To simulate a real-world agricultural sales conversation, each student randomly selected a buyer persona to embody during each presentation. Example buyer personas are displayed in Figure 2. After all presentations, students voted in two Student Choice Award categories: Most Persuasive Sales Pitch and Best Storytelling & Customer Connection.

At the conclusion of all presentations, the instructor facilitated a closing discussion connecting peer observations to classical rhetorical strategies (ethos, pathos, logos) and audience adaptation of communication principles (Lucas, 2019).

**Figure 2.** *Sample Buyer Persona for Sales Pitch Presentations*

<b>Buyer Name</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>Persona</b>
Emma the Entrepreneur	Runs a small goat cheese business and loves new agricultural products that could help streamline her farm’s operations or improve sustainability	<i>Eager Buyer</i> - She’s optimistic, open-minded, and loves innovative ag-based ideas that support local producers

**Results to Date**

After the final day of presentations, all students completed a voluntary feedback form to evaluate all components of the persuasive presentation, including the inclusion of student choice awards. As shown in Table 1, the incorporation of voting for student choice awards transformed passive listening into active evaluation and motivated students to perform at a higher level when delivering their sales pitches, consistent with Barker & Bennett (2012).

**Table 1.** *Feedback on Student Choice Award Implementation (n = 24)*

	$\mu$	$\sigma$
Peer voting felt fair and reflective of presentation quality	3.28	.57
Voting for student choice awards helped me appreciate strong persuasive techniques in others	3.28	.46
Knowing that peers would vote for Student Choice Awards motivated me to do my best work	3.23	.73
The awards added a positive, competitive element that encouraged creativity	3.11	.76
The Student Choice Awards increased overall class engagement	3.11	.68

*Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree*

**Future Plans & Advice to Others**

Future iterations of the student choice awards will incorporate digital evaluation tools (e.g., Google Forms or QR-code ballots) to streamline peer assessment and expand data tracking opportunities. Additionally, incorporating pre- and post-evaluations of persuasive speaking abilities would also add valuable insight into which components of the presentation were most effective at simulating a real-world agricultural sales conversation and improving persuasive speaking abilities. Post-secondary instructors interested in adopting this strategy should consider the following advice before implementing: 1) model effective feedback before implementation, 2) keep evaluation criteria clear and concise (3–5 categories), 3) emphasize empathy and respect, and 4) include reflective debriefing to help students connect persuasion, listening, and real-world communication skills to the sales presentation. Utilizing student choice awards as an innovative teaching strategy illustrated how peer-driven assessment can increase intrinsic motivation, improve rhetorical awareness, and create a supportive classroom culture for developing confident communicators (Weimer, 2013; Kolb, 2015).

**Costs and Resources Needed**

There are no costs associated with implementing this teaching strategy, aside from printed student evaluation sheets for each class period and recognition certificates provided to winning presenters. Students were given the opportunity to create a visual aid for their product or service to display on a personal device during their presentation, without printing.

### References

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