Best practices: Incorporating speakers in the classroom

Abstract

Our institution has created a competitive advantage around integrating alumni, business leaders, and donors into classes and non-curricular activities. While other disciplines also host speakers, the topics covered in management, organizational behavior, and entrepreneurship classes are particularly well-suited for integrating speakers, and our department is one of the cornerstones of our school’s competitive advantage. The purpose of this session is to present the many factors that are important to successfully hosting guest speakers. With the help of the audience, we hope to further develop best practices for hosting speakers.

Key Words:

Classroom speakers; leader development; real-world experiences

Session type: Symposium, 60-90 minute

Best practices: Incorporating speakers in the classroom

In a 2008 editorial in the Chronicle of Higher Education, James M. Lang (author of *On Course: A Week-by-Week Guide to Your First Semester of College Teaching*) describes an experience of hosting a guest speaker that went horribly awry. In the column, Lang writes, “The incident proved disheartening enough that I instituted a personal ban on guest speakers in the classroom at that point and haven’t had once since”. Unfortunately, the antics that Lang describes are not uncommon, and we have found that many of our peers have had bad experiences hosting guest speakers (so have we!), and some even have negative perceptions of the reasons that professors host guest speakers.

The School of Business in which we work has created a competitive advantage around integrating alumni, business leaders, and donors into classes and non-curricular activities. While other disciplines also host speakers, the topics covered in management, organizational behavior, and entrepreneurship classes are particularly well-suited for integrating speakers, and our department is one of the cornerstones of our school’s competitive advantage. Our department has four different courses built upon a model of integrating a significant number of speakers into the semester (6 to 14 speakers per course per semester), and nearly every member of our department hosts a speaker in a class at some point during the semester. The presenters of this session each integrate speakers into the classroom in various ways, and one became a full-time instructor after attending class as a guest speaker.

The purpose of this session is to present the many factors that are important to successfully hosting guest speakers. With the help of the audience, we hope to further develop best practices for hosting speakers.

Learning objectives include:

1. Recognize advantages and disadvantages of engaging community members in the classroom.
2. Gain insight as to how to choose topics and speakers appropriate for the classroom.
3. Demonstrate how to prepare speakers and students for the interaction.
4. Consider the need for debrief and assurance of learning.
5. Discuss options for integrating community members in programs outside of the classroom.

Handout: Participants will receive access to a file with several examples of syllabi and

programs that integrate community members as speakers, mentors, or advisors.

A description of the proposed session follows.

**30 minutes: An exercise in preparing the class to host speakers.**

At the start of the session, one of the session presenters will step into the role of instructor, and the attendees will become students. The presenter will be very deliberate in setting the stage for this interaction in order to get everyone into role, talking a bit about the format of the class for the semester, and asking the “students” to note that there are several speakers scheduled on the syllabus.

The instructor will first engage the “class” in a discussion of why it might be beneficial for the class to host speakers, compiling a list of the answers from the “class” on a whiteboard. The instructor will also ask the “class” what sorts of things might cause the experience to be negative for either the speaker or the students, also compiling a list of those items. This will serve as an overview of the advantages and disadvantages of including speakers in the classroom (it is expected that this component will take approximately 10 minutes).

From that list, the instructor will prompt the “class” to agree that in order to make the opportunity to host a success, the instructor *and* the students all need to take responsibility for the learning opportunity. The instructor will tell the class that in a few minutes, they will discuss the instructor’s responsibilities further. But first, the class should consider what their role will be in making the opportunity a success. The instructor will ask for a few ideas of how students can help (in the presenter’s experience, some of these answers will include strategic behaviors, like help find speakers; other answers will fall into “rules” that students should follow). After a few are given, the “instructor” will note that since there are a lot of great ideas, and probably some overlap. “Students” will be put into groups; each group will be given a small stack of post-it notes; the groups will be charged with listing each “idea” on a separate post-it notes; then the post-it notes will be compiled into categories on the board. The exercise results in a set of suggestions for student behaviors to display during class speakers. The instructor will praise the work of the “students”, and note that she will send a reminder about this list before each class period when a speaker will attend (this exercise is expected to take approximately 20 minutes).

From here, the “instructor” will start the process of transitioning back to the role of “conference presenter” by noting that this is a real exercise we sometimes use at our institution to set the stage for engagement with speakers and other guests from the community.

**10 minutes: Who we are and why we host class speakers**

The next 10 minutes of the session will consist of introduction. We will introduce ourselves, and describe the community within which our university is situated. We will also share information about the courses that we teach, and what makes them suited for a variety of class speakers. During this segment, we will also ask the audience members to introduce themselves, and share their interest in the topic.

The goal of this segment is to further establish advantages of hosting class speakers (in addition to the perspective posed by us when in the “student” role). It is expected that additions might include:

1. Student learning

2. Expansion of student network.

3. Involving donors, potential donors, and alumni in the classroom.

**5 minutes: Class Speakers Gone Awry**

We have had the unfortunate experience of hosting class speakers, only to have the experience go awry. War stories include the time that a retired general stated his only regret was not killing his boss, an executive who asked students where to buy pot (she was serious), and a CEO who clearly outlined unethical practices for securing government contracts. We have also experienced bad student behavior, including inappropriate attire, sleeping during the presentation, and belligerent questions. We will share a few of our best war stories, and invite audience members to do the same.

The goal of this segment is to build upon the disadvantages we listed as “students”, further establishing the need to use deliberately planned best practices when inviting community members into the classroom by introducing disadvantages of hosting class speakers. Disadvantages include:

1. Time taken from course content.

2. A lack of control of the content or behavior of the speaker.

3. Time required to vet and prepare the speaker.

4. Offensive student behavior.

5. Challenges with assessing student learning following the speaker.

**10 minutes: Determining the right course and learning objectives**

Several syllabi and extracurricular programming will be shared from our School of Business. To protect anonymity of the review process, the samples are not attached here, but include:

1. Syllabi from a leadership class incorporating 7-10 speakers per semester.
2. Syllabi from an entrepreneurship class incorporating 7-10 speakers per semester.
3. Syllabi from two special-topics in management courses incorporating weekly class speakers.
4. Syllabi from an intro to management course that incorporates 1 to 2 speakers per semester.
5. Syllabi from a leading change class incorporating speakers into a special project.
6. Program descriptions and schedules from several extracurricular programs that incorporate weekly interactions with community members.

The goal of this segment is to provide the audience with examples of programming that regularly incorporate community members into student learning. The audience will also be invited to share examples they may have, and add their examples to the file to be shared with session attendees.

**10 minutes: Selecting an appropriate community member**

There is an art to selecting an appropriate community member. One of the presenters has paired with a local business leader who is constantly networking new people with the business school. Another uses both national and local labor projections (e.g., <https://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_table_104.htm>) to determine industries where there is projected job growth, and then invites speakers from those industries. Another consistently uses speakers suggested by the college’s Alumni Association or the Office for Institutional Advancement.

The goal of this segment is to:

1. Brainstorm methods of finding speakers.
2. Discuss methods of vetting speakers.
3. Identify information that needs to be shared with speakers prior to the opportunity.

Students often find speakers from certain industries provocative or exciting (e.g., tech start-up firms; Fortune 500 organizations), and often find speakers from other industries less interesting. I was hosting a CEO from a muffler company once, who stated, “There’s a lot of money to be made in businesses that aren’t sexy”. Some of the most transformational learning experiences we have seen have been with speakers form industries that were not attractive to students, including manufacturing and shipping companies. In the session, we will encourage potential hosts to think about targeting industries of which students have little awareness.

**5 minutes: Preparing the class for the interaction**

Hosting a class speaker is a disruption to the typical class routine, and it is not wise to take for granted that students will respond to the disruption in a professional and desirable way. It is important to establish expectations for student behavior hosting speakers. The presenters will highlight that emphasis was placed on the exercise at the beginning of this segment, because we have found that preparing students is a key component of success. The goal of this segment is to quickly highlight that setting students expectations is key; methods of setting expectations might include:

1. An elaborate exercise in which students create the expectations.
2. Writing rules into the syllabus.
3. Stating rules the day before the speaker.
4. Reinforcing expectations with a reminder email prior to the class.

No matter the method used to establish the expectations for behavior, the act of stating the expectations, then allowing the expectations to become norms, can be mentioned again in the discussion of how norms are established within groups, and how culture develops within an organization.

**10 minutes: Debriefing the class and Assurance of Learning**

It can sometimes be difficult to document the *impact* of the speakers, or highlight speakers as a form of classroom *innovation* (two keys to success during AACSB reviews). It can also be hard to assess student learning following a speaker. Key to reinforcing the learning from the interaction with the speaker is to debrief the speaker experience during the subsequent class session, and to use the speaker interaction as part of the course assessment. The goal of this segment is to:

1. Discuss methods to debrief following a speaker.
2. Provide examples of assignments and essays that assess key learning objectives from the speaker experience.
3. Discuss methods of documentation for annual reviews, annual reports, and accreditation documents.

Example assignments and matrices for writing assignments will be shared with the audience.

**10 minutes: Conclusion and alternatives**

In conclusion, we will note that we have not always been at institutions where hosting speakers was easy. In recognition of that, the final segment will include a discussion of alternative ways to host speakers. Ideas include:

1. Hosting a speaker via WebEx or Zoom.
2. Giving an assignment to identify and spend significant time with a speaker.
3. Using presentations available on the internet (e.g., TED talks, for example).
4. Examples of programs outside of the classroom that incorporate community members.
5. Examples of alternative sources for best practices for hosting class speakers.

**Conclusion**

We recognize that while this topic may seem simple, we have found very few published reports with guidelines on how to integrate speakers into the classroom. In particular, there is almost nothing specifically pertaining to the management, organizational behavior, or leadership classroom, yet we find the topics covered in these courses to be particularly relevant to hosting speakers.