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## Journal of Accountancy



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The newsletter for accounting educators

### Help students overcome speaking anxiety

Follow this advice to help students find their voices.

By Dawn Wotapka

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The students that accounting professor Cathy Margolin, CPA, Ed.D., teaches in person at Chandler Gilbert Community College in Chandler, Ariz., tend to be younger, whereas her online pupils at DeVry University are often older. There is one thing members of both groups share: speaking anxiety.

For some, the apprehension comes from presenting before the entire class. Others get jittery when just answering a question. Margolin tells them that they should take steps to become better speakers. "You're going to go on interviews," she tells them. "You're always going to have to give presentations. You've got to put your best foot forward."

Joel Lanz, CPA/CITP, CGMA, a visiting professor at SUNY Old Westbury, urges his students to work on moving past any shyness to showcase their smarts. "You have all this knowledge in your head, but you have to use it in a way that other people can use and leverage," he tells them. "We can't all be great speakers, but we can constantly improve ourselves to be better. Ask yourselves, 'How do we up our game?'"

Here are some ways to help your students overcome their speaking anxiety:

**Have them answer low-stakes questions.** Try starting a few classes with a question that everyone can answer — instructors can provide the questions ahead of class to give students prep time or ask for spur-of-the-moment answers, Margolin suggested. To increase participation online, she asks students to volunteer to talk about a bucket-list trip and a pet they have or would like. For in-person classes, the students can display a picture as they answer the question. "Ask anything to get them talking," she said. "It's an icebreaker."

Throughout the semester, remember that some students could be terrified of making a mistake in front of their peers. While many accounting questions have a right or wrong answer, consider asking more questions involving an "opinion or point of view," said Andie Monet, a speaker and consultant who is a self-described introvert.

**Teach the basics.** Not every student has been trained in how to speak and present, so spend some time making sure everyone understands how presentations should be structured, said Gina Marcello, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Communication at Saint Elizabeth University in Morristown, N.J. "When students have a strategy to build their presentation, [the anxiety] becomes much more manageable," she said. "All good presentations [generally] include an introduction, a body with main points, and a conclusion."

**Incentivize quieter students to speak up.** Sometimes, the more outgoing students in a class dominate discussion, and shyer students may not get the speaking practice they need. Monet, who is also CEO of Strategic Solutions & Development International Inc. in Houston, suggests helping quieter students participate with a system in which everyone in class must participate before anyone is allowed to speak a second time. "Including it as a small percentage of their grade help can loosen up the quiet people a bit more," she said. Although that requires a bit more work for faculty, more students will take the opportunity to be heard.

To ensure that he doesn't overlook more introverted students' input, Lanz asks students to keep a log of how their contributions benefited the class. They submit the log at the end of the semester. The idea is to give the quieter students or those who may struggle with the language "another way to add value," he said.

**Offer feedback.** Margolin has her students present throughout the semester, and she strives to offer practical advice, such as avoiding filler words like "ah" and "um." She keeps feedback constructive. "If they make mistakes, they don't get boos, they don't get tomatoes," she said. The presentations give them practice before they're in a higher-stakes situation, such as presenting a project to a supervisor, she said.

Lanz also provides students feedback ranging from reminding them to keep their hands out of their pockets to suggesting they remove their glasses to emphasize a point. If several people make the same mistake, he brings it up with the group without mentioning an individual. In some cases, Lanz will talk to the students privately.

In a graduate capstone, he asks students to pretend they're presenting to a client or to a senior executive of a firm where they're employed. "I really ask tough questions so that they learn to think on their feet and how to present," he said. "I encourage them to make mistakes so that when they go into the real world, they're more prepared."

**Shift the focus.** Marcello urges students to remember why they're talking in the first place: the audience. "Typically, students who are most anxious hyper-focus on what other people think of them rather than focus on what knowledge they can share with the audience," said Marcello.

They should consider questions such as "How can I help the audience?" and "What information can I share to help audience members better understand the concept or idea?" she said.

**Suggest additional resources.** Lanz encourages students to check out their school's resources. He likens it to seeking help with academics, telling students, for example, "If I was challenged in math, I would go to a math help class. See how the school can help you."

Many schools offer public speaking seminars and workshops, Margolin said. Students can also get involved with an organization they're passionate about, which will likely lead to speaking opportunities, she said.

Lanz also suggests looking into Toastmasters International, a well-known organization that promotes communication and public speaking opportunities and works with some colleges and universities. Students can also join open groups that may meet at a library near their campus.

Lanz, who occasionally speaks with a stutter, is a longtime member. The group "got me to go in front of people," he said. "I still use things that I learned long ago."

— **Dawn Wotapka** is a freelance writer based in Atlanta. To comment on this article or to suggest an idea for another article, contact Courtney Vien at [Courtney.Vien@aicpa-cima.com](mailto:Courtney.Vien@aicpa-cima.com).

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