

The Big Idea

Q How do you get brainy, quiet students comfortable with public speaking?

A Send in a theatre student to shake things up. BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

“You’re under arrest,” the University of Oklahoma honors student is sternly informed while standing in a circle of her classmates. A few moments later, her place is taken by two students admiring a starry sky from the carpeted floor of Cate Center.

If this seems like an improv routine, you’re right—but it’s an improv routine with a purpose. “Presentation and Interview Skills” is helping students take on the daunting challenge of public speaking. The OU Honors College class was the brainchild of longtime supporter Will Webster, who funded the first full year of its implementation.

“The spirit of the course is really encouraging and enabling students to develop a proficiency in interpersonal communication and being able to apply that in an interview or presentation situation,” says Kyra Wharton, a 2015 OU musical theatre graduate who was hand-picked to develop and lead the class while still an Honors College student herself.

Wharton’s background and incandescent exuberance made her a natural to teach such skills as voice projection, diction, breath control and confidence. She delved into techniques used by celebrated speakers and formed a course unlike any other at OU. The class was filled within hours of its announcement.

“People want to know, ‘What can I do to make myself really stand out in a room or a pool of candidates? What can I do to make myself more special?’” Wharton says. “It’s an insecurity we all deal with—Who am I? ‘What am I here for?’ ‘How can I contribute?’ Those are the questions this course really speaks to: helping people define a sense of self and applying that sense of self to the work that we do.”

Wharton says anxiety is palpable on the first day of class. “It’s very challenging for Honors College students, because I think in a lot of ways we’re all overachievers and we’re all used to being in control, especially of our own studies.”

“I came in thinking that there was going to be a formula for success, and there isn’t,” admits OU junior Amanda Ahadzadeh of Edmond. “The biggest part of this class was learning how to make yourself feel confident in the moment and how to communicate that confidence to your interviewer.”

Students in Presentation and Interview Skills learn confidence through preparation, including stretching and

deep-breathing exercises that affect everything from voice volume to adrenaline spikes. They also master the importance of eye contact, appropriate dress, and body stance. An online component allows students to learn successful techniques by viewing and critiquing TED Talk videos. But improvisation



Robert Taylor

OU senior Summer Wright of Edmond cheers during an improv game in the “Presentation and Interview Skills” class. The exercises help Honors College students push past self-criticism and react creatively.



Hugh Scott

Kyra Wharton's years onstage helped OU Honors College students become skilled public presenters. "Presence is always compelling," says the 2015 musical theatre graduate, who used her training and natural enthusiasm to boost even the shyest speaker.

takes students—especially high achievers—to a whole new level.

Wharton, age 22, admits honors students are especially susceptible to self-analysis and criticism. Improv helps them push past negative impulses into a creative space. "It's just about being yourself and delivering," she says. "When you remove the self-criticism, it helps you to 'show up' much better."

Some might assume that improv is well outside the comfort zone of OU's most serious students. "I don't think that hindered any of us," Ahadizadeh laughs. "Because when Kyra says, 'We're going to play a game,' we're like, 'I'm going to win this.' We look at it as another academic challenge."

One week before spring finals, Wharton asks her students how they feel. "Exhausted," "stressed" and "anxious" all make the list. As Van Halen's "Jump" suddenly blares from speakers, Wharton launches the surprised classmates into two minutes of jumping jacks, knee lifts and running in place.

"Now how do you feel?" she asks with a smile. "Refreshed," "energized" and "hyped" are quick answers, and Wharton explains that exercise is yet another way to prepare for a public

presentation. She then challenges the students to debate a topic for one minute without leaning on a verbal break like "um" or "uh." The winner makes it to 42 seconds.

"No one's expecting you to be perfect," she reassures them. But perfection is much closer than it was just months earlier.

"At the beginning of the semester most of our students were shy, inexperienced, or both when it came to public speaking," says Brian Johnson, director of the Honors College Writing Center and co-teacher of the course. "By the end of the semester we were working with poised, articulate, engaged young men and women who are better prepared for the professional and academic experiences that await them in the near future."

Wharton hopes one day Presentation and Interview Skills will expand campus-wide so all OU students have the opportunity to develop their potential.

"It's very freeing when you can show up in a room and be yourself and share yourself with others," she says. "I'm really honored that I've been able to see that happen for students for three semesters. It has made my OU journey incredible."