



Keys to Effectively Utilizing Guest Speakers¹

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Utilizing guest speakers is a method for bringing the industry into the classroom. Guest speakers create a connection to the “real world” and help students better see the “big picture.” Also, students often respond well to a change of pace. Utilizing a guest speaker can change a normal class into an event. Presented here are simple suggestions regarding actions to be taken and points to be considered in order to maximize the effectiveness of guest speakers. A checklist at the end of this document highlights these ideas and it will be particularly useful in the planning process.

The first step in utilizing a guest speaker in the classroom is selecting a speaker to invite. When deciding whom to invite, there are two simple points to keep in mind. First, utilize someone who has something to add to the curriculum. It is better for teachers to utilize guest speakers who address topics that are outside the teachers' areas of expertise. Secondly, it is best to invite speakers who possess some kind of credentials. In most cases, the speaker's occupation is the greatest credential. An example of this is a producer coming in to speak about their product or production methods. Ideally, a guest speaker will be able to expose students to dimensions of their career and industry that a textbook, or teacher, would be unable to adequately portray. In

this manner, guest speakers can be an excellent career exploration tool for students. This exploration could be at a variety of levels. The additional exposure to possible careers associated with the in-class presentation can spark further career interest. At the other extreme, the contact formed between students and the guest speaker may lead to job-shadowing opportunities, internships, or even job placement Supervised Agricultural Experiences (SAEs).

Another important factor that educators tend to underemphasize when selecting a guest speaker is the actual speaking/presenting ability of the person being asked. From an educator's standpoint, it can be easy to select speakers based solely on their knowledge of the subject matter. It is fairly intuitive that the more knowledgeable a given speaker is the more students will be able to learn from them. However, in order for a guest speaker to be effective, he or she must be a good communicator.

Communication with a guest speaker prior to their presentation is a key factor in the effectiveness of the presentation and the educational value it brings to students. It is not uncommon for important details to be overlooked. Logistical matters should always be discussed. Guest speakers need to know where they are speaking; not only the location of the presentation

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site, but also details such as the size and layout of the room. It is important to remember that guest speakers are just that—guests. Generally, they are not familiar with the campus layout, parking or visitor check-in procedures. These issues should be addressed in advance. Similarly, guests are generally not familiar with the bell/class schedule. In most cases, it is simpler for the teacher to do all the time calculations and just give the guest speaker a specific time to be there (as opposed to “the beginning of third period”). Additionally, the length of the presentation should be addressed in advance. Generally the length of the class period is the limiting factor for the length of a presentation. If this is the case, remember to figure in time for student entrance and exit, as well as introductions and questions. If the length of the class period is not a concern, remember that students will only pay attention to a speaker for so long.

The available resources should also be discussed in advance. Teachers should let guest speakers know what types of multimedia equipment will be at their disposal. More importantly, they should determine what guest speakers think they will need for their presentation and accommodations should be made. If guest speakers require items not regularly found in the classroom, teachers need to borrow or check-out these items before the day of the presentation. Settling all of these logistical concerns in advance can help alleviate some of the unnecessary pressures on guest speakers. The more details that are worked out in advance, the fewer opportunities for obstacles exist.

After the logistics are settled, it is important to work with guest speakers to identify a specific topic. The key word here is *specific*. It is very difficult to adequately prepare students without a specific topic. For example, having a speaker come in and talk about “the cattle business” is too vague. A better topic would be “effective marketing strategies for Florida calves.” The information covered in a given instructional unit prior to the guest speaker should provide the background information needed by the students to fully understand the speaker's presentation. This is not to say guest speakers should only be utilized at the end of an instructional unit. Teachers should utilize guest speakers whenever they

feel it would benefit their students. Regardless of when in a given unit a guest speaker is utilized, students should be provided with necessary background information. Background information should allow the students to listen to the presentation without getting overwhelmed by new concepts and vocabulary. Teachers should not feel they must address the entire topic in advance; they should trust the guest speaker to cover the material effectively. Prior to a guest speaker's presentation, teachers should also address the class regarding items such as behavior, properly greeting guests, and asking appropriate questions. Consider having students prepare questions in advance; even general questions that students developed before the presentation can increase student participation.

Guest speakers are more effective when the topics they present are incorporated into the curriculum and not used as stand-alone activities. In keeping with this, the information addressed by a guest speaker should be assessed just like any other part of the curriculum. This, too, makes it important for teachers to work with speakers prior to their presentations, to ensure the material they cover will be at an appropriate level for the students. The speaker must be informed of the students' level of understanding regarding the topic. Building on the previous example, guest speakers would need to know if they could start by discussing selling calves in truckload lots or if they would need to start by explaining what a truckload lot is. A presentation at a level beneath the students will insult their intelligence and they will not want to listen. Likewise, a presentation at a much higher level than student understanding will confuse and discourage them. Either way, learning opportunities escape the students unless the presentation is at the appropriate level. Ideally, the teacher and the guest speaker should work together to create learning objectives that should be met through the presentation. These objectives should be shared with students prior to the presentation. This enables the teacher to include the information discussed by the guest speaker in the unit assessment.

After the guest speaker presents, whether it is the next time the class meets or the same day, the teacher should review and reflect upon the information covered during the presentation. This follow-up can

be vital to students' learning. Many times students will be hesitant to ask a guest questions, even if they are unclear about something. However, when reviewing the information with their teacher with whom they are more comfortable, these same students will often ask for clarification. This is a good time for the teacher to evaluate the effectiveness of the presentation and determine if they need to address the topic any further. The follow-up period is also a good time to have students prepare some sort of thank you gesture for the speaker. For example, the class, or classes, could sign a thank you card or letter. In addition to a thank you from the students, it is a good gesture for the teacher to send his or her own thank you card. Politeness and appreciation will make it much easier if the teacher ever wishes to ask the speaker back.

An additional benefit of utilizing guest speakers in the classroom involves school-community relations. There is no better way to involve community members with their local school than to have them physically come to campus during school hours. Most people find it flattering to be invited as a guest speaker, so teachers should not be afraid to ask. A declined invitation may still lead to future support and/or involvement on the part of the person asked.

When utilized properly, guest speakers can be excellent teaching tools. Their expertise and industry connections can provide students with opportunities and insight to which they would not have had access otherwise. Students will be greatly rewarded with an excellent learning experience for the time their teacher spends arranging and preparing for a guest speaker.

Keys to Effectively Utilizing Guest Speakers in the Classroom: A Check-List

Numbers indicate actions to be taken. Letters indicate points to be considered when taking the actions.

1. Select a guest speaker to invite. _____
 - A. Does the speaker have something to add to the curriculum? _____
 - B. Does the speaker have the appropriate credentials? _____
 - C. Is the speaker able to present effectively? _____

2. Communicate with selected speaker. _____

Logistics

 - A. Classroom location _____
 - B. Size and layout of classroom _____
 - C. Parking _____
 - D. Visitor check-in procedures _____
 - E. Specific time _____
 - F. Available\Required equipment _____

Presentation Specific

 - A. Specific topic _____
 - B. Appropriate length _____
 - C. Correct level of complexity _____
 - D. Learning Objectives _____

3. Make necessary arrangements _____
 - A. Clear speaker with administration _____
 - B. Reserve any needed equipment _____

4. Provide students with necessary background information. _____

5. Review and reflect with students. _____

6. Prepare thank you for speaker _____
 - A. Thank you from students _____
 - B. Thank you from teacher _____