David Williams is teaching business students the art of 50-cent words.

“Keep it simple, make eye contact, replace ‘um’ with silence and stand evenly on both feet to avoid weaving,” are a few of the fundamental tips that I watched Williams give five seniors this summer who were preparing for their next class presentation and upcoming jobs.

These students are among nearly 1,000 each year who seek help improving their professional skills from Williams and the Price College Business Communication Center at the University of Oklahoma.

With a click of a stop watch, the students practice their presentations in a dedicated coaching room on the second floor of Price Hall while being recorded for review later.

Williams, who is the director of the center, praises their efforts and shows them how to make the presentation continue to flow as smooth as silk even after a mistake.

“Giving a business presentation is different than giving a speech. You don’t want to perform; you want to be interesting, concise and effective,” Williams says.

In addition to perfecting presentations, the center helps students expand on what they have learned and polish their writing and people skills to successfully transition from the classroom and meet expectations of employers.

Williams, along with Westheimer Communication Mentor Steve Wilson, works with individuals or groups of students. Wilson says the center is an extra resource for students. “If students take advantage of it, this is a good way for them to develop skills where they might not otherwise.”

Wilson says he works with students to change their writing perspective from student to professional. Consultations range from composing scholarship thank you letters to dissertations. He also conducts faculty workshops targeted at writing and designing class papers; class presentations targeted at writing specific types of papers for students; and co-conducts workshops on various student topics for faculty.

A lot of times, business students develop a fear of writing. “I work really hard to change the way they view it and help them overcome that fear,” says Wilson, who is available whenever a student is in need.

Williams says the center is starting to make an impact on students who realize how helpful it is and refer it to friends. “Ideally, our goal is to see students three times before they get out. We want to raise their skill and confidence level.”

The Business Communication Center opened in 1996 with only seven computers in the basement of Adams Hall to train students to use multimedia. Williams broadened the scope of the center over the years to include presentation delivery skills, writing skills and workplace “people” skills. In 2005, the center moved to its present location in Price Hall with the generous support of ConocoPhillips, offering students 22 workstations and the coaching room.

Williams says some of the skills they...
focus on rival top skills people pay to learn in the corporate world. “I am trying to equip undergraduates with an MBA level education in communicating information.”

Student Brandon Mikael believes the communication center is incredibly helpful. “It showed in our presentations and our grades,” he says.

Mikael, who will be a senior this fall, says it is important to get your ideas across in a successful manner and communicate those ideas in a way in which will make people receptive.

He used suggestions from the BCC while working this summer and interacting with clients in a favorable way. “I am going to be using it [the center] all my senior year,” he adds.

Mark Sharfman, director of the Division of Management and Entrepreneurship and professor of strategic management, says all the technical training in the world is useless without the ability to effectively communicate orally, in writing and now, digitally. Every business school tries to teach this, but at Price College, the students have an advantage and are reaching performance targets, due in large measure to the invaluable training, coaching and feedback offered through the communication center.

Another feature of the center is the Bruzzy Westheimer Presentation Competition held each fall. Jerome “Bruzzy” Westheimer says he started this unique competition seven years ago as another way to help prepare students for what they will face in their careers.

About 15 teams compete and each participant receives a cash prize for entering. Competitors are required to speak and dress properly for a business setting and compose an appropriately formatted letter.

Westheimer is president of the Jerome Westheimer Family Foundation in Ardmore, whose mission supports science, education and the arts. In addition to establishing the competition, he also has contributed equipment and funding, and devoted time to the communication center.

Westheimer learned quickly after graduating from an out-of-state college that graduates, including him, were not learning important communication skills. The business world expects graduates to communicate in written and verbal forms correctly, unlike the various shortcuts in texting and e-mail to which they are becoming accustomed, he says. “David Williams and Steve Wilson have the necessary knowledge to make every OU student who utilizes the BCC a better student who will be more marketable heading out into the business world.”

Students put the finishing touches on their team projects in the BCC’s computer lab.