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ABSTRACT

Noting that, in recent years, college speech departments across the nation have been deleted, altered, or at least renamed, this paper examines various aspects of the disappearance of speech from the college curriculum. The following areas are considered: students' perception of speech as a nonmarketable major; disciplines to which latent speech majors are attracted; the necessity to speak logically and well as an important requirement for many jobs; the need for reinforcing proper speech training for students; the shift in recent college speech textbooks from emphasis on the term "speech" to emphasis on "communication" or "speech communication"; and connotations of this change in language. The paper points to positive values in traditional speech courses and programs, and it laments their passing. (GW)

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Jerry W. Bradley

What Happened to Speech?

Though I am surely flanked by a brace of rhetoricians (and I often call myself one as well), this is no rhetorical question but rather one I ask in earnestness. This question was prompted about a year ago when I learned that my new teaching position would involve classes in speech along with the English courses which I was accustomed to teaching. Although I had minored in speech as an undergraduate, I had done little study in the area since that time, so I sought out my colleagues for advice in selecting texts and in matters of speech courses in general. I looked in the campus directory of the large Eastern liberal arts university where I was then teaching and found the address of the speech department. After some difficulty I located that address in the rear of an exhausted-looking office building. I say I located the address because that was about all I found. There were no speech offices at all, merely a mail drop of some half-dozen slots which had been collecting circulars, junkmail, memoranda and dust in almost equal proportions. I asked a passing student what had happened to the speech department and was informed that it had been abolished several years before but I might try the School of Communication for help. My unwarranted hope was that the speech department had been incorporated into the School of Communication and resided there peacefully under its new name. Surely professors of speech still stalked the campus. What I found was a large, partially constructed edifice housing offices, laboratories and classrooms for radio-tv courses, advertising programs, the journalism department, and the campus newspaper and radio station. But what happened to speech?

CS 203 657

Since that time I have tried to account for the silent passing of this once popular and essential member of college curricula, for I have learned that speech departments and courses across the country have been deleted, altered, or at least renamed. Here are some of my observations.

Fundamentally I think students see speech as a non-marketable major, although I am convinced they recognize the value of individualized speech instruction, which I will speak to momentarily. What jobs can a graduate get with a degree in speech? Not many come readily to mind as being logical employment for those with extensive speech training. The demand for elocution coaches has abated, and the openings for announcers and narrators is small, even in the world of children's records and tapes for the blind. Many speech departments have splintered, scattering drama majors, rhetoricians, and speech pathologists in many directions. Now certainly drama majors are employable; some students really do become successful actors and are able to support themselves at their craft. Careers too await speech pathologists and audiologists. And as the federal government continues to intervene in the affairs of public education, the right to an education for all, including those with genetic speech problems, will insure for a time at least some jobs for these majors. Rhetoricians, and I include here all teachers of persuasion, once the staple of speech faculty, have forsaken the spoken word for the written, excepting that lover of file drawers and vests, the debate coach, who splits his allegiance. Consider some popular rhetoric texts for example: Corbett's Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, Winterowd's Rhetoric and Writing, Tibbetts' The Strategies of Rhetoric, and Rhetoric in a Modern Mode by Bell and Cohn. Each of these texts is primarily concerned with written composition. But what happened to speech?

Well if the traditional speech major seems to be an unsalable commodity, to what other disciplines are these latent majors attracted? Many are going into the allied fields of communication -- radio-tv, public relations, journalism, advertising. The March Atlantic reports that the number of students majoring in journalism is greater by far than the total number of jobs existent in journalism at present. If all the present positions on U.S. newspapers suddenly became available to these would-be Woodwards and budding Bernsteins, there would still be over 24,000 of them unemployed. The rate of increase in students majoring in journalism is twice that of the growth rate of all higher education. One-third of all students pursuing degrees in the area of communications (and that includes speech) select journalism as their major. Advertising and public relations as well have showed considerable increases in the number of majors, and potential d.j.'s and newsreaders continue to crowd the nation's classrooms. But what happened to speech?

Is speech so unmarketable? As a major, perhaps, even though many other unmarketable majors continue to flourish (English among them). But the ability to speak logically and well is still an important requirement for many jobs. Dr. Paul Rankin of Ohio State maintains that we spend 70% of our day communicating. Of that time 45% is spent listening and 30% talking, with 16% devoted to reading and 9% to writing. 75% of our communication is oral, not visual, according to Rankin, validating the importance of sound speech training in our daily lives. More astonishing, a University of Iowa study indicates that the ratio between oral and visual communication in white collar workers is always at least 3 to 1, while in blue collar employ[illegible] it often soars to 50 to 1! Employers may not want speech majors,

but they often want employees who exhibit considerable speech training. But as speech becomes a less desirable major, speech departments begin to retrench and even disappear. My point is, of course, that this should not happen. Students should be taught, since most do not already know, how to speak well in public. They should be given a forum in which to speak, even if it is only a classroom. Students and schools may be abandoning speech as a major, but they must continue to recognize the elemental importance of speech training to the education process in general. (And if speech disappears from our campuses, from what source will this training come?)

Students do not naively think that they speak well merely because they have been speaking most of their lives. Although they may have mastered the basic syntactical structure of the language by the age of seven, they are still disturbed about their own ineffectiveness as speakers. A look at the American Council on Education's report, The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1976, testifies to this. When students were asked to rate their skills in many different areas, most students, confident and optimistic about their own abilities, saw themselves to be well above average in most fields, easily outdistancing the skills of their peers in their own minds. In speech techniques this was not the case. Only 19.4% of the women and 23.9% of the men felt above average in any way in speaking ability, far below the figures in areas such as math aptitudes, reading skills, and writing ability. In the East this figure dips to 17.0% for the women and a 19.4% score overall.

As educators, we must recognize, as students already do, the need for reinforcing proper speech training. We must not, regardless of our own academic disciplines, aid in the renunciation of speech education. If today

people attribute no special value to the spoken word, and some teachers are guilty of this, they do so only because they have become thoroughly convinced by now of the ineffectualness of their own speechmaking. We should all be somewhat alarmed by the study of Dr. Donald Shields of the University of Missouri and R. John Cragan of Illinois State University, two linguists who perfected a method of producing political speeches tailored to specific audiences through the use of a computer. After soliciting opinions on foreign policy from a cross-section of residents in Peoria, Illinois, their responses were fed into an IBM-370 computer. The machine then wrote an eight minute speech on foreign affairs. Shields delivered this speech in Peoria to an audience that knew nothing of its actual composition and he received a standing ovation. While I confess amazement at the abilities of the two linguists, I am equally uneasy about the future consequences of such artificial speechmaking. We must not allow machines to usurp what is native human ground.

A look into recent textbooks has not eased my anxiety much either. In my search for suitable texts I noticed a curious phenomenon. Many titles of speech books no longer mention speech [redacted] at all but incorporate the word communication in their titles, just as the speech department at my former school had been swallowed and digested by the School of Communication. A decade ago speech students used books with the following straightforward titles: A Guide to Public Speaking (William Stedman), Speak to Me (J.H.C. Green), Speaking Well (Loren Reid), The Challenge of Effective Speaking (Rudolph Verderber), Creative Speech (Keith R. St. Onge), and perhaps the classic of several decades of speech classes, Sarett and Foster's Basic Principles of Speech.

But in the 1970's the emphasis has been away from such basic titles; communication is the "in" word. Holt, Rinehart and Winston offers Practical Uses of Speech Communication (Barrett), although it had formerly been published as Practical Methods in Speech, Speech Communication (Dance and Larson), Approaching Speech/Communication (Burgoon), and Persuasive Communication (Bettinghaus). McGraw-Hill recommends General Speech Communication (Baird, Knower and Becker) and A Reader in Speech Communication (Gibson); Prentice-Hall publishes Basic Oral Communication (Capp) and this year's new title Speech Communication (Ross); and Scott-Foresman suggests classroom adoption of The Speech Communication Process (Clevenger and Matthews), Effective Speech-Communication (Welden and Ellingsworth), or Principles of Speech Communication (Monroe and Ehniger), which had enjoyed lasting success since 1943 under the simple title Basic Principles of Speech. John Wiley recommends their edition of Speech Communication (Zachais and Bender) and Chandler Publishing offers Speech: Content and Communication (Mudd and Sillars).

Why this shift to communication? I make several guesses. Dance and Larson maintain that "new rhetorical insights are being offered by phenomenological philosophers; new clinical applications by social psychologists and analytical psychiatrists; new cross-cultural insights by cognitive anthropologistis and political scientists; new ways of viewing the mechanisms involved by neurologists, pathologists, audiologists; and new esthetic and ethical judgments come from many sources." These new sources require new texts. Fair enough, but do they warrant a change in terminology from speech to communication? If so, why, especially since the books are essentially updated recapitulations of Cicero and Aristotle?

Some would accuse me of foot-dragging, of failing to adapt to the changing terminology of the times. But I maintain that the change in language has brought new connotations with it, some which I am reluctant to accept. In the preface to Communicative Speaking and Listening the three authors note how the text has changed in its four editions over the years. Perhaps some of this same change in thinking applies to speech programs too. The first edition in 1949 was organized to "serve college courses in public speaking. The revision of 1955 . . . presented 'speech education as a centralizing focus of liberal and humane preparation for fruitful living and effective citizenship.'. . . The edition of 1962 involved . . . considerable new emphasis upon the informal daily speech needs of individuals -- as speakers and as listeners -- and with further development of the psychological and social psychological consequences of oral communication." The fourth edition endeavors "to develop the problems of oral discourse in the context of the broad panoply of insight encompassed by the humanities and social sciences, and in terms of the immediate and prospective needs of students." A new book requires a new title, so Communicative Speech gives way to Communicative Speaking and Listening, which implies that speech by itself does not involve itself with considerations of an audience, an absurd notion. Communication does suggest that there is more to the exchange of ideas than merely speaking, but teachers of speech have insisted for some twenty-five centuries that speech does so as well.

Even the text I now use places the audience in prime importance: The Audience, The Message, The Speaker (Hasling), although it was once published as The Message, The Speaker, The Audience. So why do I use such a book if, as I say, it is misdirected? Precisely because only the title

is misdirected in many of these works. Basically these works follow fundamental rhetorical teachings; the title of the book I use in fact reaffirms the Ar'stotelian idea of the triadic structure of argument (a theorem which the IBM-370 may not recongize). What I am sa/ing then is that the language of these texts has changed but not their essential substance, and by changing even subtly the meaning of speech these very texts attempt to reshape our thinking of traditional speech courses and programs.

Granted communication does suggest a potentially wider realm of readers than does speech, although some texts, such as Business and Professional Speech Communication (Zelko), Interpersonal Communication in the Modern Organization (Bormann, Howells, Nichols and Shapiro) and Effective Business Speech (Sandford and Yeager), overtly try to reach the business and professional minded student that Dale Carnegie won't. And maybe communications texts garner more sales than speech texts among radio-tv and journalism students (there's certainly nothing inherently wrong with selling books) but at what expense to the definition of speech.

Consider some of the connotations of communication. I recall that big building housing television and radio equipment, film projectors and printing presses. In these means of communication how do we guarantee the importance of the audience, or even the message? Are there enough Emily Litella's to save us by speaking up against such single-sided utterances? Speech certainly did not carry these implications.

Furthermore we have seen in recent years how rhetoric, an honorable study, has become synonymous with "bullshit" in the minds of many. Will speech too come to mean empty or vacuous statements? Must we adopt the

guise of technology to make sense? Have the Concorde and the interstate highways and Barbara Walters significantly altered the demands of speech situations? We easily forget the distinction between words referring to percepts, but we remain keenly aware of the distinctions between aspects of perceived experience. We must, therefore, reify speech to save it from pejoration. We must not separate the word from experience. And let us come to expect more from speech programs than pompous orators, disc jockeys and countless unemployables.

A Scottish proverb reminds "he speaks what he likes, he hears what he does not like." I suppose this is so. You have politely allowed me time to speak what I like, and you may have heard what you do not like. It has not been my intention to displease, and I leave you with one simple plea -- what happened to speech?