DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 263 636 CS 505 101

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TITLE Teaching Advance Public Speaking: A Challenge or a Casualty of the "Back-to-Basics" Movement.
PUB DATE 10 Nov 85
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (71st, Denver, CO, November 7-10, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advanced Courses; *College Curriculum; *Course Content; *Educational Needs; Higher Education; Public Speaking; Rhetoric; *Speech Communication; *Speech Curriculum; Speech Instruction; Student Research

ABSTRACT

While there is a need for basic oral competence, speech communication programs should provide more sophisticated training in public eloquence. Such an advanced course should first be genre-centered instead of interaction centered. Instead of emphasizing the audience-speaker interaction, the course should center on the creation, analysis, and evaluation of rhetorical genres, such as the epideictic oration, the "apologia," the forensic disputation, the television spot, or the heckling debate. Second, the advanced course should include a critical as opposed to a behavioral focus, emphasizing the development of sensitivities to critical dimensions of discourse: the possibilities of rhetorical invention, enthymematic arguments, ethical and pathetic proofs, the use of the topoi, rhetorical disposition, fantasy themes, and rhetorical myths imbedded in public address. Third, an advanced course should be research oriented. Research projects should include systematically observing communication in natural environments, with students reporting on the structural context they observed, the communicative participants, the research question being tested by the observation, the method used to collect the data, the observation itself, and the conclusions. (HTH)

ABSTRACT

Teaching Advanced Public Speaking: A Challenge or a Casualty of the 'Back-to-Basics' Movement

by

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Many speech communication professors may be left with the feeling of failure when the majority of their basic speech students do not develop much overt eloquence as a result of taking a basic speech course. While it may have been necessary to devote our efforts to researching basic communication competence, we still need to devote some resources to more advanced public speaking teaching, at least for our majors. The best speech communication programs, as Carroll Arnold argues, are those which provide students with critical analysis skills, scientific and humanistic inquiry into the nature of communication experience and training in practice and performance of public address.

* Delivered at the 71st Convention of the Speech Communication Association, Denver, Colorado, November 10, 1985.

"Uh, and ah, err, ya know, its kinda like, well, you know what I mean, like neat and all that." Such lexical gibberish is as widespread as it is regrettable. Often, when administrators at many college and universities hear such palaver, their immediate response is, "Well, that student sure needs a course in public speaking." And, it is assumed, upon the completion of the course, that barely-articulate student is prepared for entrance into rhetorical nirvana. Alas, when the student completes the course and no overt eloquence develops, we speech communication professors may be left with the nagging suspicion that somehow we have failed; worse, we may feel compelled to either explain or rationalize the "failures."

Few other college courses have generated such unrealizable expectations from the various publics a college or university has to serve. No student in Tennis 100, for example, is expected to win at Wimbledon; no student of Psychology 101 is expected to become a twentieth-century William James; no doughty veteran of Writing Arts 101 is expected to write like Milton; likewise, no refugee from the rarified air of Engineering 699 is expected to be able to change a tire! In short, few introductory courses of any kind develop very much expertise; it is also common for advanced courses to have less-than-exalted expectations. Yet how many of us have heard the Jeremiadic lamentation from our non-speech colleagues: "Why can't they speak well? They've had a speech course!"

There is little point to my suggesting the need for advanced study of oral communication principles, at least for our speech communication majors. Speaking well is central to being educated. As Modaff and Hopper suggest, "in the beginning was and is the spoken word" (Modaff and Hopper 1984, 37). The need is thus evident, the argument warranted. But the problem of developing rhetorical

eloquence may never be adequately addressed.

A cursory examination of the published materials in the area of public address indicates that most of the emphasis in this area of our discipline is on basic competency skills. How many of our public speaking textbooks contain such trenchant phrases in their titles as "a basic text," "basic oral communication," "practical public speaking," "back to fundamentals," "fundamentals of effective speech,"? And my favorite: "instant eloquence: a lazy man's [sic] guide to public speaking. "Instant eloquence" is a contradiction in terms. Of course, there is a need for basic oral competence, but a speech communication program needs to provide more sophisticated training in public eloquence; if we don't teach it, it won't get taught.

Little of our recent research literature deals with developing public eloquence but rather with such things as developing basic speech competencies, creating new taxonomies for speech communication, dealing with communication apprehensives, and creating instruments for measuring basic competencies. In what may be a misguided effort to hop the educational bandwagon, have we embraced the back-to-basics movement to the detriment of teaching advanced public speaking? If this is true, it can be suggested that at least at the secondary level, the "back-to basics" movement has excluded us from its provinces. Ellen Ritter (1978) suggests that speech study may itself be a casualty of the back-to-basics effort; in light of the deplorable state of writing and reading skills, Ritter argues that we presently need to justify and account for ourselves even as a basic discipline and a legitimate academic enterprise. Worse yet is Hart's fear that because speech communication is popular with so many trendy, career-oriented students, speech communication could "become the first handmaiden to the New Philistines" in higher education (Hart 1981, 37). One welcomes the arguments of Dance, Phillips, Hart, Hostettler and others, who suggest that "communicative effectiveness is an

inalienable right" (Hart 1985, 164).

While we can all run to any convenient Delphic oracle for an answer to the question "Whether public eloquence?," it is my purpose to do more than indulge in lamentation. There is a need for such courses and, as yet, many of us represent departments and institutions that still devote at least some academic and fiscal resources to the teaching of advanced public speaking. If I had to hazard a guess as to what the future holds, I strongly suspect that, unless firmly anchored to the curriculum, advanced public speaking courses may not survive in academia for very much longer. Carroll Arnold maintains that the complete speech communication program -- that is, the one which educates best and earns the most academic respect -- not only engages in critical analysis of communication phenomena and humanistic and scientific inquiry into communication as experience, but also provides practice and performance of public addess (Arnold 1985, 71). In light of this less-than-auspicious environment yet acknowledging its value in the curriculum, how can we describe a course in advanced public speaking? How is it different from other forms of oral communication training? It is my argument that such a course should be genre-centered instead of inter-action centered, have a critical as opposed to an essentially behavioral focus and finally, it should include field research.

Instead of emphasizing the audience-speaker interaction, I propose that an advanced course in public speaking center on the creation, analysis, and evaluation of rhetorical genres. Thus a student should have the opportunity of delivering and criticizing the epideictic oration, the apologia, the forensic disputation, the speech-to-a-hostile audience, the thirty second or one minute television "spot," the heckling debate, and the formalized address. While no one would suggest that any public speaking course should ignore the interacting relationship between the speaker and the audience, one ought to assume that a veteran of a fundamentals course is reasonably competent in terms of delivery

skills and reasonably sensitive about such things as feedback, the communication cycle, liveliness, and the like. Few fundamentals students, however, are more than dimly aware of the recalcitrant mysteries of formal rhetorical discourse.

Secondly, an advanced course in public speaking should include a critical as opposed to a behavioral focus. Such a focus, after all, is what established speech as an academic area. Such a focus would emphasize the development of sensitivities to critical dimensions of discourse: the possibilities of rhetorical invention, enthymematic arguments, ethical and pathetic proofs, the use of the topoi, rhetorical disposition, fantasy themes, and rhetorical myths imbedded in public address. While I never mean to exclude the behavioral consequences of oral discourse, I mean to place emphasis on what is said, as well as how it is received, on the potential effectiveness of discourse and not just on the immediate effect on one particular audience.

Thirdly, I propose that an advanced course in public speaking be research oriented. For example, Mark Hickson (1977), proposed an excellent model for conducting speech research. Although Hickson does not specifically address the problem of teaching a course in advanced public speaking, he does present a persuasive argument that undergraduate speech communication majors are both willing and able to perform miniature research projects. He argues that it is enormously profitable and pedagogically sound for our students to study communication by systematically observing communication in natural environments. Hickson gives an example of student research projects. Essentially, his students learned how to report (1) the structural context they observed, (2) the communicative participants, (3) the research question being tested by the observation, (4) the method used to collect the data, (5) the observation itself, and (6) the conclusions.

I propose that we incorporate similar research suggestions for advanced speech study. While the aim of teaching our students how to systematically

observe communication in natural settings is a goal of all of our teaching, for the student of advanced public speaking, such training is invigorating. Can we not assign our students such questions as "What is considered effective oral communication in your community or sub-culture? If I wanted to hear eloquent oral discourse on or near campus, where would I go? How would I recognize it? What is it made of?" Such questions are replete with possibilities: conducting field research on local political, academic, and clergy populations; assessing source credibility among campus and community leaders; comparing and contrasting speaking styles; testing long held axioms of accepted standards of oral discourse in the cauldron of the marketplace. The possibilities are endless.

Of course, there are many other dimensions and strategies available to the teacher of the advanced course in oral communication. I make claim neither to have exhausted all the possibilities nor to have enumerated a desideratum of specifics. Rather, it is my modest hope to have painted a perimeter with the widest possible brush stroke.

As Wallace Bacon (1977) eloquently suggests, rhetoric is still at the center of human life, for rhetoric even in our daily lives involves questions of choice, taste, politics, judgments, and values, to name a few. Our students, he continues, must know more than techniques; they must know what to speak, not just how to speak: ". . . if we restrict our vision to teaching simply 'how to' we not only will dwindle, - we ought to dwindle. We will find that those who really know [what to do] if they want to, can find out 'how to' without us" (1977, 13). As speech communication teachers, we are concerned "not simply with how to act like a human being; we are concerned with how to be a human being" (1977, 14).

A course in advanced public speaking confronts many problems in how to be the most human of beings. Best of luck to all of us dedicated to providing such instruction and thus finding workable and worthwhile solutions.

Endnotes

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