ABSTRACT
        The reduction of communication "fundamentals" to
depoliticized, atheoretical skills in public speaking contradicts
recent challenges to rhetoric, such as critical rhetoric, aesthetic
rhetoric, and ritual communication. Consequently, teaching in the
basic course and university research contradict each other,
presenting an image of a confused and inconsistent discipline. A
renewed emphasis on communication as ritual provides a central focus
that unites research and the teaching of the basic course. The two
approaches to teaching basic speech courses are defined as the
dominant one, or the outcome paradigm, and the propositional one, or
the ritual/process approach. Outcome implies communication as
transmission: messages are "sent" by speakers to audience
"receivers." Evaluation in the outcome paradigm emphasizes
performance and the content of those messages is only indirectly
important. Communication as transmission means information
processing. Communication as ritual means maintaining and
transforming reality. Although the two co-exist, the transmission
view dominates. In ritual communication, the symbolic negotiation and
struggle over what is reality is constructed, maintained, repaired,
and transformed. Viewing the speech event as a part of an ongoing
process creates an awareness of the broader context that contains the
event. The key difference between the two approaches is the role of
the individual in shaping and constructing the material, therefore
the reality, as opposed to the discovery of an already constructed
reality. Challenges to the basic course are needed to pull together
research and teaching so the basic speech course looks more like the
discipline that it represents. (CR)

Centrality in Research and Teaching:

Some New Directions for the Basic Speech Course

Theodore Matula
Ph.D. (Expected) May 1997
Department of Communication
The Ohio State University
3016 Derby Hall
154 N. Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43201
614-292-3400 (o)
tmatula@magnus.acs.ohio-state.edu

Position Paper Presented at the Speech Communication Association

Convention, San Antonio, Texas, 1995

Centrality in Research and Teaching:
Some New Directions for the Basic Speech Course

The reduction of communication "fundamentals" to de-
politicized, atheoretical "skills" in public speaking
contradicts recent challenges to rhetoric, such as critical
rhetoric, aesthetic rhetoric, and ritual communication.
Consequently, teaching in the basic course and research in
the University contradict one another, presenting an image
of the communication discipline as confused and
inconsistent. As part of the project linking teaching and
research, communication scholars should work towards radical
restructuring of basic courses that emphasize "speech."
Alternative perspectives should be used to challenge the
speech paradigm. My purpose in this paper is to
problematize the basic course in speech and suggest some
ways that it can be transformed by contemporary rhetorical
theory. In this presentation, I will focus on some ways
that a renewed emphasis on communication as ritual provides
a central focus that unites research and the teaching of the
basic course.

The first part of my paper is primarily a critique of
what I perceive as the dominant paradigm for speech
instruction. The criticisms I make in this part of the
paper are developed from six years of experience teaching
public speaking and other basic communication courses at six
different institutions of higher learning. My findings are
the result of ongoing critical evaluation of my own and

others' teaching, examination of speech textbooks,
participation at speech communication conference panels of
public speaking, review of written and oral evaluations
provided by students, and coding of personal and focus group
interviews conducted with speech students and instructors.
In addition, I have kept journals on my observations and
thoughts about students and their speeches, as well as my
own teaching. Also, I have trained--both formally and
informally--a number of teaching assistants who teach the
presentational speaking course at Ohio State. My critique
of the speech course has been ongoing and informal; thus, I
have difficulty saying where structured analysis using
contemporary rhetorical theory begins and where unstructured
opinion ends. Therefore, I present my ideas as a position
paper rather than a research article.

Before presenting my critique, I should make it clear
that I intend my comments as a general reading of the state
of teaching speech and not as a rigorous analysis. I doubt
that a course exists which would exactly fit the
characteristics of the monolithic paradigm I will describe
as the "outcome" paradigm. However, I do wish to suggest
that a given course would probably "tend" toward the
paradigm rather than away from it. It follows, then, that
the number of competent and excellent speech teachers who
succeed within the outcome paradigm do so not because of it
but despite it. Thus, much of my critique comes from my own

4

and others' attempts to solve problems and correct errors in teaching communication, but also from observing successful instructors teaching well.

This critique is inspired by an ongoing frustration related to teaching basic speech courses. As I progressed through two graduate programs and learned more about communication and rhetorical theory, I was able to construct more clearly an analysis of the dominant paradigm for speech education. Thus, my description of this paradigm is influenced by my identification of alternative approaches that appear more efficacious as an introduction to communication. I have come to define the two approaches-- the dominant one and the propositional one--as the "outcome paradigm" and the "ritual/process approach," respectively. I will first describe speech education as outcome paradigm, and then offer suggestions for how the ritual approach may be operationalized.

I use the term "outcome" because speeches are treated in this paradigm as the outcome of prior events. In the public speaking class, the focus is on speech as a performance that follows prior work that the speaker has put into it. "Outcome" also implies the model for communication that has become dominant in basic courses--communication as transmission. Communication is conceptualized in physical, mechanical terms--messages are sent by speakers to receivers, who may send feedback to the speaker orally or

visually. Conceiving communication as the transmission of information to audiences emphasizes the physical outcome of the process--the speech event. Although communication as process is an important assumption of this approach, the process is usually punctuated around the speech event. Communication processes such as devising ideas for speeches, writing the speech, and thinking about the speech afterwards are not often included as part of the mechanical process of "speech" communication that gets considered and evaluated in such courses.

Evaluation in the outcome paradigm emphasizes performance, grades being based on a three- or five- or ten-minute presentation to an audience of speech students. Evaluation of speech outcome typically divides the event into a delivery component and an organizational component. Content of messages is relegated to a function of organization and organization is necessary only insofar it constitutes a handy way to measure the "form" of the delivery. Lip-service is paid to speech construction, but delivery dominates in this model; content and message construction figure into the picture mainly in that they contribute to the overall delivery. Thus, delivery subsumes content.

Some other important features of the "speech-as-outcome" approach include:

Speech as "talk" is propietary. What I mean by this is

that students are graded on the performances of messages,
but the content of those messages is only indirectly
important. Students are responsible for talking, mostly.
What they talk about may be wholly unoriginal, bearing no
evidence of having been gathered by or. student as opposed
to another, but this gathering is not important.
Communication "skills" need go no further than the
mechanical process of interacting--sending and receiving
messages.

"General topics" is the primary strategy of invention.
Since messages are organized by "topic," the first step in
creating a speech is finding an appropriate topic.
Appropriateness usually means that a topic is on a serious
subjec., on an issue already recognized as a social problem
or concern. (Magazine articles and encyclopedias are
typical sources for finding such topics, as well as a
generic stance toward them.) The existence of a topic prior
to its discovery in the invention process means that the
content is largely beyond the control of the speaker.
Writing a speech is mainly a matter of choosing from among
available information and rhetoric is reduced to adding
stylistic adornment that makes the performance "flow"
better.

The virtual context predominates. Speech classes teach
students how to give speeches that are appropriate for
speech classes. One would presume that basic skills learned

7

in such classes are applicable in other contexts; however,
despite the importance of "rhetorical situations" in
communication research, it is the context itself that is
usually not problematized. That is, the speech class and
its peculiar constraints may be very different from non-
speech class contexts in which students will have to speak--
for example, motivation for speaking in the outcome paradigm
comes from desire to earn a good grade, follow the
requirements of the exercise, not to embarass one's self in
front of peers, etc. Accomplishing these goals means to
respond to the context in which they are provided. Skills
developed by students to respond to the speech class context
may not carry over into non-speech class applications.
Likewise, since in a speech class, so much of the context is
a "given"--the student knows the evaluation criteria, knows
the audience, knows the room, time-limits, requirements of
the audience, etc.--skill in analyzing and responding to,
and creating contexts is not learned in the speech class.

I noted earlier that my description of the basic course
as an outcome paradigm owes much to alternative ways of
conceptualizing communication; in particular, the work of
James Carey[1] on communication as ritual has influenced this
analysis. James Carey uses the term "ritual communication"
to provide a counterpart to the transmission model that

---

[1] Carey, J. (1975). A cultural approach to communication.
Communication, 2, 1-22.

dominates much thinking on communication. Simply put,
communication as transmission emphasizes the mechanistic,
physical materiality of communication. Communication as
ritual emphasizes the construction of culture through
symbolic processes. Communication as transmission means
information-processing. Communication as ritual means
maintaining and transforming reality. These two views, says
Carey, co-exist in the American consciousness (and in other
industrialized societies), however, the transmission view--
inspired by the idea of communication as transportation of
goods and ideas--dominates.

My articulation of the outcome paradigm derives, in
part, from viewing its transmission orientation of
communication in contrast to the ritual orienation. How
does the assumption of communication as ritual transform the
basic speech course?

First, communication as process is not limited to the
speech event. In Carey's definition of ritual
communication, communication is a "symbolic process whereby
reality is constructed, maintained, repaired and
transformed" (p. 5). The symbolic negotiation and struggle
over what constitutes reality is ongoing. The speech event
participates in the ongoing process but does not constitute
it physically. This alters students' relationship to speech
content, inducing them to consider their role in maintaining
or challenging a given "reality" or given authoratative

reading of the world.

Reconceptualizing the communication process in this way leads to a variety of positive challenges to the outcome model; primarily, it places a new emphasis on the process by which presentations are devised--thus, the "ritual/process approach" moniker. Instead of an emphasis on "topics" as an invention strategy, the ritual/process approach would encourage students to develop more unique presentations that derive from personal interests and values. For example, I have employed an introductory exercise called the "Personal Coat-of-Arms" in speech classes, which asks students to make a visual representation of things they do well, things they love, etc. As a conclusion, they are asked to create a motto, a personal statement of belief. Later in the course, these statements can be used to stimulate brainstorming exercises that help students come up with presentation ideas. The key difference here between the ritual/process and outcome approaches is that the ritual/process emphasizes the role of the individual in shaping and constructing the material--and therefore the reality- of the speech, through a personal process of "construction" (as opposed to "discovery" of an already constructed reality).

The ritual/process model also circumvents the "virtual context" problem discussed earlier. Viewing the speech event as part of an ongoing symbolic process creates an awareness of the broader context that contains the event.

10

The speech class itself is part of the context of education,
the university, instruction, etc. Speech subject matter
represents a particular reading of a "topic" that exists in
relation to other views and opinions on a topic. Thus,
there is no pure stance that a speaker can or should take on
a given subject. Instead, speakers develop a particular
"slant" on a given subject in order to share a view with an
interested audience. Like the slant of a newspaper article,
the slant of a speech is its narrative function, and it
should be devised in such a way that it makes the topic
relevant to the particular audience to which it is
presented.

Evaluation of presentations is also transformed in the
ritual model, mainly in that the presentation is not all
that is evaluated. The ritual/process model emphasizes the
processes by which presentations are ueveloped, borrowing
strategies of composition instructors, such as keeping
journals and giving presentations to classmates for practice
and improvement. In short, in shifting emphasis from the
outcome of the speech event, to the process by which the
speech event is planned, the ritual/process model encourages
students to talk about talking, write about talking, and
evaluate themselves and others. It encourages more
awareness of the processes that lead up to the speech event.
An added benefit of this emphasis is that anxiety may be
reduced because the speech event is de-emphasized.

Finally, the actual evaluation of the speech event does not emphasize the outcome of the particular event.   Like other aspects of this model, evaluation refers to the ongoing process.   Although I have not yet operationalized this aspect of the model, I believe there are new possibilities for evaluation based on the idea of speech competencies.   Instead of a conventional grade, students would be evaluated on how they meet certain competencies over a long period of time.   So, perhaps by the end of the semester, students should have mastered "using visual aids" or "responding to feedback."   The individual speech event, then, becomes one facet of ongoing evaluation of a student's developing skills.

The notion of communication as a ritual, symbolic process is well-represented in some communication research, where it is juxtaposed against transmission views of communication.   If this distinction seems like an oversimplification, this is probably because these two strains of thought are well-represented in research, and, as Carey indicates, some of the best writing about communication--particularly that of John Dewey from whom he derives these mutual views--strikes balances between the two.

However, in the basic speech class, the balance is not equal.   Mechanistic views of communication dominate and reduce the symbolic, narrative functions of communication to

adornment or to something that should be "inserted" into a
speech or added to its content. Such treatment of narrative
and symbols contributes to making the basic course decidedly
non-rhetorical, and contradicts significant research in the
broad field of communication built upon ritual perspective.
In this paper, I have outlined one way that the basic course
may be critiqued and challenged--but I believe there are
other ways that such challenge can be accomplished. And I
believe these challenges are needed to pull together
research and teaching so that the basic speech course looks
more like the discipline that it represents.