

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 808

CS 510 190

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TITLE Dissent, Controversy and the Basic Course: The Question of Cathexis.  
PUB DATE 1999-11-00  
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (85th, Chicago, Illinois, November 4-7, 1999).  
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS College Curriculum; \*Course Content; Higher Education; \*Pedagogical Content Knowledge; \*Public Speaking; Rhetoric; \*Rhetorical Theory; \*Speech Curriculum; \*Speech Instruction; Student Attitudes; Teacher Attitudes  
IDENTIFIERS Speech Communication Education; Speech Departments

ABSTRACT

This paper poses questions about the pedagogical basis of public speaking courses, based on the issue of traditional course models versus models which are more closely aligned with current rhetorical philosophy. The discussion in the paper centers around the potential integration of current philosophy into teaching practice. It addresses three primary topics: (1) the energy instigating a person to public speaking (student energy); (2) the absence of enthusiasm regarding public speaking instruction (teacher energy); and (3) the need for the public speaking course (is this investment of energy worthwhile?). Contains 4 references. (EF)

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**Dissent, Controversy and the Basic Course:  
The Question of Cathexis**

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Paper delivered to the Critical and Cultural Studies Division  
National Communication Association Convention, Chicago, IL  
November 7, 1999

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## **Dissent, Controversy and the Basic Course: The Question of Cathexis**

The subtitle of the present paper is most appropriate, particularly the term "question;" although, it might have also read "The Confession of Cathexis." Until recently I had, as I imagine some of my colleagues have, engaged in the instruction of the basic speech communication course, public speaking, as a praxis, designed around received tradition and habit. Unreflexively, perhaps lulled into apathy by textbooks and assignments, I produced a public speaking course based on Aristotle and audiences, Plato and PowerPoint, while in my theoretical musings I challenged theories of rhetoric I perceived as traditional, consensus- and corporate-based. I don't necessarily think I was a bad teacher, but I recognize that I had not invested the kind of emotional energy into teaching public speaking I had in my academic or upper-division courses. Perhaps this is merely a personal choice/failing, or perhaps it is indicative of a larger question of disciplinary cathexis.

I thank Cathy Glenn for organizing this panel and for forcing the issue of pedagogy into my thinking. I realize now how carelessly I had engaged in the practice and discussion of pedagogy. It is a difficult task to recognize one's own hypocrisy and an even more difficult task to rectify it. Thus, my brief discussion today will not answer the question of cathexis but pose it. I believe, in that previewing move I have taught so many students during ten years teaching public speaking courses, there are three versions of this question I pose, primarily to myself.

## The Question of Cathexis: Why Speak?

My initial drafting of this question of cathexis was focused on the instruction of the public speaking course and what I perceived as a general neglect for the conditions, impulses, positionalities which lift an individual from their seat and thrusts them onto the platform. Here the notion of cathexis was framed in terms of the emotional energy channeled into a topic, situation, audience, etc. by the speaker and the question sought to interrogate the generally artificial framework of the public speaking assignment. Are we missing, the question went, the emotional energy that turns a situation into a rhetorical situation? If so might some pedagogical strategy be employed to provoke, or at the very least invoke, such an impulse?

The answer, at least at the time when the question was designed as a format for the answer, was a "return" or reconsideration of the canon of *memoria* but here as a stage occurring before *inventio*. A memory of injustices past, of previous wrongs, of injuries suffered and emotions sublimated. These memories, embedded in the hidden transcripts of those who shared such pains, would, of course, become a kind of *topoi* for the oppressed, a series of images and incidents that would filter into and in-between the rhetoric that, with the right opportunity, might emerge. But the inventional function of these memories was not my primary concern, it was the question of whether such memories, echoes of cathexis, might be pedagogically useful.

This question, as I understand it, is more fundamental than providing a justification for instruction in public speaking. Most textbooks in public speaking have provided such a justification and I note with interest the findings of Nina Persi and

William Denman (1997) that subtle shifts in this justification have occurred across the last half-century. Post World War II, public speaking instruction was based largely on a civic responsibility to protect democratic institutions. Post-Vietnam instruction was justified based on the importance of citizen involvement in decisions that affected their future. The 1980s presented a more self-centered justification, based apparently on economic and personal gains to be acquired through public speaking proficiency and the 1990s have seen a blending of various justifications and, a personal observation, some initial attempts to incorporate notions of culture and multiculturalism. These justifications, however, are more about the place of the course than the place of the speaker.

Indeed, if we justify the public speaking course along the lines of actually practiced democratic discourse, then we should pay considerable attention to the place of the speaker within actually occurring democratic situations. This is not to discount the considerable amount of research and criticism directed at such moments of democratic discourse, but to ask where it exists within the public speaking course and whether we design our curriculum around these moments.

### **The Question of Cathexis: Why teach?**

While I think this line of questioning might be useful, several events intervened, giving me reason to pause before answering the question of cathexis or being satisfied with the previous framing. I'll share one. I have had the opportunity to spend considerably more time interacting with composition/rhetoric folks since taking a

position at Syracuse University. During an informal conversation, during a baseball game as I recall, I made the mistake of jabbing at a composition instructor about my perception that my students were incapable of creating a coherent paragraph. Now, I'll confess to having been partially aware of the various controversies surrounding composition pedagogy and I'm sure Professor Wells could provide us a much more effective summary of the various positions embroiled in the controversies over "teaching writing. But, as I was being harangued by my composition colleague about the various ideological assumptions embedded in my complaint about "teaching" "proper" "paragraphs," I became curious about the amount of emotional/disciplinary energy channeled into the question of the, if you'll pardon the expression, "basic course" in composition.

While I will not pretend to be well-versed in these various arguments and perspectives on the teaching of writing, I have enough sense of these struggles to notice the absence of such energetic contests in the discourse of public speaking. Why? Perhaps it is the orthodoxy of received tradition. Eileen Berens and Teresa Nance (1991) in a review of public speaking textbooks noted that our public speaking textbooks have followed the same basic structural pattern for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that there is a remarkable consistency in topics covered by different textbooks.

Perhaps this lack of disciplinary energy channeled towards the public speaking course should not come as a surprise. Jo Sprague (1992) in proposing a new agenda for research into education noted a general neglect for the broader rhetorical and cultural questions surrounding education within speech communication. Communication scholars are, Sprague contends, more interested in the effectiveness of pedagogical strategies and

the dynamics of classroom communication than in the cultural and ideological underpinnings of these phenomena. And Dilip Gaonkar (1993) in his controversial essay "The idea of rhetoric in the rhetoric of science" notes the tendency to think of rhetoric in terms of interpretation rather than practice. Thus, we should not be surprised that more energy is channeled into teaching critical studies than into teaching public speaking practice. Taken together, a powerful dynamic becomes evident: (speech) rhetoric scholars are more interested in critically interpreting discourse produced outside the institutions of education than in turning these critical lenses back upon their own "basic course."

### **The Question of Cathexis: Why ask why?**

The final question of cathexis asks whether the investment of such emotional/scholarly/disciplinary energy into problematizing the ideology of the public speaking course is a worthwhile endeavor. And, I honestly don't know the answer to this question. Three events make me believe, at least initially, that it is. At last year's pre-convention seminar on the notion of the public sphere, several participants called attention to the public speaking course as a crucial element in rehabilitating, rejuvenating, reconfiguring some public sphere or spheres. While I remain quite openly skeptical of such the concept of the sphere I find it interesting the amount of legitimating weight is placed on this basic course of ours. It seems to be the primary vehicle for our scholarly, civic, economic, educational intervention into the world and, yet, it goes largely un-theorized.

Not entirely unrelated, a recent CRTNET thread surrounding the decision to eliminate the Basic Course Annual raised an interesting question from Rosa Eberly. Rosa, a professor in composition and rhetoric and UT-Austin, raised the question of why we refer to it as the "basic course." Do we mean "basic" in the sense of "foundational?" or do we mean "basic" in the sense of "remedial?" This seems an interesting and related question.

Finally, my resolve to follow the current approach to this topic was galvanized during a recent lecture by Jim McCroskey at Syracuse University. During his discussion of his communi-biological perspective, Professor McCroskey seemed to suggest that the genetic basis of communication behavior made the teaching of public speaking irrelevant and a waste of time. I found this conclusion disturbing not only because of my confusion/incredulity towards the validity of genetically pre-determined communication behavior but also because it violated my preconceived notion that the public speaking course served some larger socio-cultural functions. But, as I explored this dissonance I found myself unsure what these socio-cultural functions were.

### **Conclusion**

Hence my confession of cathexis: Recognition of uncertainty about where my emotional/disciplinary energy should be channeled. Should rhetoricians in speech pursue a deeper dialogue regarding the function and ideological underpinnings of the public speaking course? Are we willing to channel our scholarly energy into this dialogue? Are we willing to fundamentally adapt our public speaking courses to current conceptions of



dissent, controversy, publics, deliberation, and dialogue? Perhaps we should seek counsel from our colleagues in composition, perhaps pursuing the common grounds of rhetoric both spoken and written.

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