REFLECTION ESSAY

Creating a Speech Choir: The Bounty of Authentic Audience Experience for Students

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Abstract: For most students at my university, classroom experience alone was the choice for formally developing speaking skills. My idea was to provide students with recurring authentic audience experience, attending to the audience dimension outlined by Derryberry (1989) as a critical requirement of public speaking pedagogy. Through research, a new idea was proposed: Create a Speech Choir, combining talents of the students in one performance. Though it has elements of forensics, reader's theater, choral reading, public speaking and more, it is not identical to any of these. As the team evolved, more pedagogical elements were added including service learning, attention to feedback intervention, and limited social activism in an atmosphere of collaboration and creativity. Quite unexpectedly, however, Speech Choir managed to attract both students with performance confidence and those professing high communication apprehension.

After many years of teaching the basic course, an advanced public speaking course, and sponsoring a forensics team, I had become increasingly aware of the limitations of laboratory-based public speaking education. Classroom audiences were largely unappreciative and unresponsive to student efforts. Genuine opportunities for audience analysis and, thus, tailoring of presentations to specific audience exigencies, were minimal. At forensics tournaments, the realities of the competitive environment precluded most of the "real life" audience instruction opportunities I sought. Knowing the gap between real and laboratory audiences from my own speaking experiences, I found it difficult to fully explain to students how their training in these settings would translate into their own real-world lives. I thought, "It's the best that can be done, given the available resources."

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To view the program discussed in this article, use this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkHcrZvKk0g

Looking into disciplinary research for possible answers, I found that facilitating genuine audience experiences for students on an ongoing basis was all but entirely unaddressed. While researchers have identified the value of authentic audience experiences for students (Derryberry, 1989), the effects of audience-based practice and preparation time on grades (Menzel & Carrell, 1994; Smith & Frymier, 2006), and the idea of brief repeated exposure to audiences as a means of addressing public speaking state anxiety (Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt, 2009), little research has examined the effects of regular authentic audience exposure on student speaking skills and anxiety-reduction as compared to classroom-only instruction. Moreover, a lack of models for structuring such an educational effort, much less how-to-implement advice, exist.

Over the next several years of my teaching career, I discovered a model that provides exactly this regularly recurring genuine audience experience for students. This model—which I have labeled "Speech Choir"—has proved to be sustainable on limited resources and, according to students' self-reports, has evolved into far more benefits for students than I had imagined.

The "Speech Choir" has defied easy description. Though it has elements of forensics, reader's theater, choral reading, and public speaking, it is not identical to any of these activities. Nevertheless, this "Speech Choir"—which is now a one-credit-hour, repeatable course that typically enrolls 25–40 students, is offered each semester, and serves as an audience-experience credit for the Communication Studies major—has superseded my university's forensics team, more than quintupling the number of students participating in such an activity on my campus. This reflection essay will describe its creation, evolution, and relationship to recent communication pedagogical research while explicating the pursuit of providing ongoing access to public spaces for student speaking. It will conclude with samples of student perceptions of the impact of participating in the activity.

What Is a Speech Choir?

During a sabbatical intended for other projects, I interviewed a nationally-known retired professor of preaching from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. I discussed with him how an undergraduate program might better prepare students for seminary training. During our conversation, he suggested I try creating a Speech Choir to offer singular group performances at university events, highlighting talents of students while providing service to the community. The Speech Choir concept, he asserted, allowed audiences to better grasp some forms of literature such as Biblical texts or abstract prose and poetry by breaking the readings into multiple voices (F. B. Craddock, personal communication, October 3, 2003). I was intrigued enough to give it a try.

The first presentation was a scripture reading at the university's regular chapel service, with the existing forensics team serving as the student participants. The text, selected by the chaplain, was typed into a "script," assigning various phrases or verses to different speakers. Strategic choices enhanced meanings and clarified ideas. Sentences and partial sentences were assigned to speakers based on tone and confidence level, employing multiple voices or striking voice contrasts to emphasize key points. Dialogue was separated from narration using different voices. Lengthy or awkward passages were broken into ideational "bites." Scripts were assembled for each performer into black notebooks with page covers for easy page turns. The presentation was rehearsed, with minimal blocking added to provide focus for the audience.

By all accounts, the performance brought the text to life. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with audience members responding directly to the students. Community appreciation subsequently produced invitations for more performances. In the first year, requests for our presentations were made for the campus Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day observance, Women's History Month, five more scripture readings, a reception honoring a visiting distinguished professor of biology, and the annual alumni reunion luncheon. Since then, the range of event invitations has become astoundingly broad. Performances have included memorial services, a wedding, art history and state history academic conferences, a local high school honoring a military hero, and a church's stewardship campaign. Professors in other academic disciplines extended invitations to present topics otherwise challenging for the students in their classes to engage (e.g., the Holocaust, abortion) and honor societies and athletic teams requested the group entertain at their annual banquets. With each new performance, Speech Choir members are required to adapt to new audiences, occasions, and settings.

Generating Impetus

Derryberry (1989) articulated the value of real audience interaction for students by noting that "speaking and interpreting before a variety of public audiences ranging from literature classes, political science seminars, service clubs, and religious organizations clearly elicit adjustment to a variety of listeners" (p. 10). Furthermore, he asserted that "a variety of audience settings avoids supporting the idea that a special audience situation is required for a student to speak" (p. 10). Arguing that students limited to classroom or tournament settings will develop distorted views of what it means to give a speech, Derryberry noted that genuine and varied audience interaction "generates far more impetus than merely scheduling another practice session" (p. 11).

As the Speech Choir evolved, invitations beyond scripture readings required the development of original materials around a theme. Coaching students to find literary and relevant informational sources on assigned themes encouraged them to enhance their resource evaluation skills. Becoming more aware and curious about credible and aesthetically-pleasing criteria for performance materials, this task required them to assess potential script components for appropriateness and adaptability to unique events. Presentations were composed of different genres and perspectives woven creatively together.

Internally, a culture of collaboration formed among the students enrolled in the Speech Choir course. Pressure to produce group presentations that represented the whole activity well (and the university) set the tone for students to contribute critiques that improved performances. With some guidance from me about constructive critiques focused on the task (King, 2016), and encouragement for developing empathic relationships (Dannels, Housley Gaffney, & Martin, 2011), students created a feedback environment where risky ideas were valued, even if not implemented as proposed. The event preparation climate invited thoughtful listening to the suggestions made by all students. There is a significant openness to trying ideas about which they are skeptical, and they are able to make corporate choices they can all be proud to present. Shared responsibility for successful performances has fostered this community and creativity (Dannels et al., 2014). What, in any other course, would have been understood as "group projects" and summarily devalued for perceived offenses such assignments often impose on

student well-being, were transformed into common goals. Performers and critics are invested in, and appreciated for, contributing their varied perspectives and talents.

Early on, it was apparent that service learning and some communication activism were being addressed through this activity. Student organizations asked the Speech Choir to promote their issues and charities (e.g., childhood cancer, eating disorders, the National Day of Silence, domestic violence, human trafficking), opening the door to communication activism and serving as an avenue for "building blocks for civic action" (Harnett, 2017, p. 383). Additionally, the Speech Choir has marked milestones of university life (e.g., the inauguration of a new president, tributes to retiring faculty members, my campus response to a student suicide) and is regularly featured at Admissions recruiting events. These performances embody the "skill-set practice and reflexivity" of service learning as described by Britt (2012, p. 82) as students reflect afterwards on each performance to enhance learning for future presentations. Genuine audience events are the engine for the primary pedagogical features of this model.

Eliciting Adjustments

Student response to the activity is evidenced through a self-evaluation paper. Each semester students are asked to intentionally reflect on their progress, or lack thereof, in the development of their communication skills. Since I started the Speech Choir, a majority of the students have mentioned the gain of heightened levels of confidence in their public speaking. (My university's Institutional Review Board approved the use of student quotations taken from these papers in this essay.) For example, one student's not-uncommon comparison involved experiences in high school and several semesters of participating in Speech Choir:

> I was Salutatorian for my graduating class in high school. THIS WAS MY WORST NIGHT-MARE COMING TO LIFE. . . . I was beside myself with anxiety. . . . I couldn't focus on writing the speech because I was so terrified to deliver it. I DESPERATELY wanted to be better. . . . My first day at Speech Choir I knew I was way out of my league watching some of the [other students] perform. I wanted to be like them. . . . I wanted to be that confident. [The last semester of my senior year,] I really felt like I had made it. I felt confident and comfortable giving my presentation. I finally felt like I had power over my fear. I was able to give a presentation I was proud of . . . Now with my newfound confidence, I plan on being a teaching assistant in my grad program . . . I feel as though that transition was due to the skills that were instilled in me from being in Speech Choir.

One might think students with self-professed high levels of communication apprehension would be performance-avoidant and would not seek participation in a non-required activity like Speech Choir. However, though their skepticism is palpable when they join the group, in most cases, their peers have convinced them that the experience is beneficial. For some students, their public speaking anxiety is matched by a determination to overcome it. In any case, the authentic performances drive their courage by requiring them to represent well, to support their peers, and to serve the needs of audiences, occasions, and venues. And with genuine audience appreciation, their confidence increases.

Another frequent student observation is the impact Speech Choir has had on their ability to give and receive constructive feedback. With critiques focused intently on the task at hand, students often remark on their awareness of feedback intervention and its usefulness. For example, one student remarked on the transferability of his sense of competency:

> [T]he most important thing that I have learned from Speech Choir is how to give constructive criticism and do so effectively. Most people have no idea how to give constructive criticism and it is a skill that takes a while to perfect. This skill is something that I use in multiple settings . . . I am able to communicate what they need to improve without destroying their confidence and discrediting the work they have accomplished.

Students overwhelmingly imply that constructive feedback is something largely unfamiliar to them in other educational experiences. But when managing multiple performances which have little-to-no flexibility in scheduling, there is literally no time for bickering and sniping in the preparation process, with much less time to spend on the meta-task concerns that can lower feedback efficacy (King, 2016). Conversely, creativity and innovation are crucial. To minimize the negative and maximize the positive, constructive criticism is indispensable. Students not only adjust heartily and readily to the standard, but also they claim to use the skill in other arenas.

Less overt in most cases, yet hovering in student awareness, are the values that the group process provides. Showing appreciation for the collaborative dynamics of the performance development process, one student said:

The performance[s have] developed my skills . . . working with a team. With seven or eight people in a script . . . , there are many different ideas with how [we] should proceed, and it is important to know how to resolve conflicts [about] the direction of the script. Through observation . . . I have learned that often the best way to reconcile the ideas is to give . . . equal recognition and try them [all] out.

Once students learn the demands of authentic audiences, they are better able to critique brainstormed suggestions. They recognize the needs of those audiences, knowing the multiple ways they vary, and can critique the next presentation preparations from that strength, rather than positing themselves or the instructor as the sole reference point. This critique fosters the collaboration with team members—a recognition that "every utterance [they] make when working with others either moves toward or away from [the Speech Choir and the audience] communit[ies]" (Dannels et al., 2014, p. 378).

Conclusion

This Speech Choir incorporates audience authenticity by requiring external invitations to propel the work of the class. Creativity and adaptability to rhetorical exigencies powers the visibility of the group, generating more invitations and giving impetus to productive collaboration. Service learning and social activism have proven to be rich sources for negotiating these public spaces. Student self-reports of increased confidence in public presentation dominate the feedback, but this is by no means the only advantage. For me, the Speech Choir program has met and exceeded all original expectations.

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