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Resisting the Notion of "Proper Literacy" as the Standard for Speaking Well

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It seems that everyone both within and outside of American higher education is extolling the "value" of effective oral communication. Employers consistently rank communication skills in their top 5 most desired qualities in college graduates (Bauer-Wolf, 2019; Finley, 2021; Gewertz, 2018) and college administrators and admissions officers are happy to talk about how their institutions offer students unique opportunities to become better speakers. But what do these stakeholders mean by "better speakers"? If we probe a little deeper into these celebratory discourses, we often find they are working from impoverished notions of oral communication skills. Far too often, speaking well is reduced to what Kathleen Turner described in her 2014 NACC keynote address as "talking pretty" without any sense of the ways in which effective speaking is always a profoundly contextual process that necessitates complex thinking and problem solving to harness the rhetorical power of a speaker, for a particular audience, at a specific occasion (Turner, 2014). And, vitally, these discourses do not acknowledge that the standards by which the "prettiness" of spoken language are judged in the U.S. are largely imported from written English—or how they function to enforce a very narrow definition of writing or speaking well.

We were initially inspired to begin this project by the work of Muriel Harris, founder of the Purdue University Writing Lab, who examines many popular definitions of "good" writing and their limitations in her article "Making our Institutional Discourses Sticky." She argues that campus writing centers themselves may inadvertently contribute to problematic public understandings of what constitutes writing well. Noting that while writing centers "voice allegiance to rhetorical principles that are long standing hallmarks of effective academic writing," she finds that those principles are frequently left out of the public facing discourses of the centers (Harris, 2010, p. 48). Her analysis highlights how important it is for centers that support student writing to be deeply reflexive about their own discourses and how they may actually reinforce limited and limiting conceptions of effective communication.

We seek to extend Harris' analysis of writing center discourses and to join in the wider conversations of faculty and communication center professionals across higher education to reflect on the public facing discourses of speaking/communication centers and the ways in which they may inadvertently undermine our larger efforts to promote rich, complex, and inclusive understandings of speaking well. Specifically, in this essay, we looked at a key site where communication centers advance conceptions of speaking: the materials we publish online to assist students (and potentially their faculty) in crafting, performing, and assessing oral messages. As these tip sheets/pages, videos, and tutorials are designed to provide short, easily digestible support for speakers and faculty they often necessarily shortcut the definitional work about what constitutes effective oral communication. One consequence of this, we argue, is the way that such materials often default to standards of what Peter Elbow calls "proper literacy" and its ties to what Lippi-Green (1994) calls "standard language ideology." Despite our awareness as educators of the wide range of performative options for spoken language as a tool to connect with diverse audiences, our materials can end up promoting the ideal of standard edited written English, a formulation rooted in a particular conception of middle-class whiteness, as the baseline for effective speaking.

Our essay intersects with recent work by communication center scholars who have begun the vital process of calling attention to the unstated racial hierarchies that are part of nearly all aspects of university culture, including the work of communication centers (Cuny & Mabrey 2020; Ladva 2020; Villano 2020, Nguyen 2021). Ladva's powerful 2020 essay illustrates the harms of centering a version of English rooted in White identity in our teaching and calls on all of us to actively work to change the linguistic culture of higher education. She brilliantly lays out the ways in which our own centers and practices can reinscribe anti-Black ideologies that are anathema to many of us working in the field without us even realizing that we are doing so. Building on this broad critique of the erasure of Black and Indigenous language traditions in communication centers, Nguyen's 2021 analysis of communication center tip sheets illuminates the ways in which supposedly "race neutral" language still rests on presumed notions of linguistic correctness derived from a standard—White—English and thereby unintentionally create communication centers as spaces that function to exclude or diminish the experiences and linguistic performances of Black students and faculty (Nguyen, 2021).

What these scholars have highlighted is that we as faculty and communication center professionals must confront the deeply rooted linguistic assumptions and traditions that underlie common notions of speaking well. In this essay, we argue that one way to engage in such work is to look closely at how and why conceptions of speaking well have come to rest on an unquestioned ideal of proper literacy. Such a narrow vision of speaking functions to circumscribe the performative potential of our rhetorical spaces, narrowing or even erasing the multitude of possibilities for producing and performing effective oral messages and unintentionally reinforcing aspects of white privilege and exclusion in the academy. We offer the possibility of a return to the classical rhetorical idea of *techne*—discipline, craft, or art—as one approach to resist the confines and dangers of written "propriety" in our spoken discourse. By seeing speaking as its own, fully realized, complex, and adaptable art we might open new possibilities for our interactions with students and instructors that do not rest on presumptions of linguistic propriety derived from writing.

Exploring this argument first requires a consideration of the role of the ideal of "proper literacy" and the power of standard language ideology in evaluating speaking and writing. We then turn to a brief analysis of communication center materials to look at some examples of the ways our materials may intersect with such ideas. Finally, we consider Atwill's notion of the classical rhetorical concept of *techne* as a possible tool for helping to construct materials that resist the expectations of proper literacy and present a more creative and powerful understanding of effective speaking to our audiences.

Speaking, Proper Literacy, and Standard English

The idea that speaking well is essentially the performative equivalent of writing correctly is certainly not new. In his 1927 essay "Literate and Illiterate Speech," American linguist Leonard Bloomfield challenged what he characterized as the "popular explanation" of correct and incorrect speech (p. 432). According to Bloomfield, common wisdom held that incorrect speech was simply a matter of "knowledge" versus "ignorance," specifically knowledge of something that could be recognized as "correct" English (p. 432). Incorrect speaking practices such as "mispronunciations," "faulty locations" and "bad grammar" were the result of the speaker's ignorance of the correct forms (Bloomfield, p. 432). He argues that the problem with this approach to incorrect speaking is that it simply imports notions of incorrect writing into the realm of speech without a consideration for the ways in which the two modes differ. Bloomfield contends:

> … popular comment on a wrong form of speech is often given in terms that properly apply to writing, not to speech; for instance he who says *git* instead of *get*, or *ketch* instead of *catch*, is popularly said to be substituting one *letter* for another, to mistaking the *spelling* of the word. In sum, the popular ideas about language apply very well to writing, but are irrelevant to speech. (p. 433)

Bloomfield's analysis is instructive insofar as it calls attention both to the ways in which "correctness" in speaking had already become dependent upon criteria relevant only to written language and in the ways that it highlights the stigma that attached to those whose speech did not match such criteria.

Much has changed in the nearly 100 years since Bloomfield published his essay. Yet the primacy of writing as the benchmark of judging what constitutes correct or proper English and the judgements made against those who fail to speak in the prescribed manner have remained intact. British linguist David Crystal (2005) explains, though speech and writing are quite distinct forms of language use, "written English provides the standard that society values, and its relative permanence and worldwide circulation have given it a very special place within the life of the community" (p. 2). Lippi-Green's (1994) analysis of the pervasiveness of standard language ideology in American culture highlights the multitude of ways that people and institutions insist, despite all the evidence to the contrary "that there is one correct way to speak and write English," and that those who use "nonstandard" forms of language are less intelligent and less logical (p. 167-168).

Of course, what such insistence obscures is that the rules of standard language are historically and culturally produced. Any understanding of linguistic rules for "correctness" have changed over time and reflect their differing historical contexts. In *Vernacular Eloquence*, Peter Elbow (2012) argues that concerns with correctness in writing stem not from writing *per se*, but rather from a particular conception of literacy. Noting that literacy originally meant the ability to put words into writing without concerns for spelling and grammar (what he characterizes as *mere* or *vulgar* literacy), literacy over time came to mean the ability to produce "*correct standard* written language" (p. 343, italics in the original). Instead of the act of writing being a marker of literacy—one was literate if they could physically produce written language—literacy became associated with particular qualities of writing, including correct spelling and grammar and "restrictions on vocabulary and register" (p. 343). Colloquial, vulgar and/or undignified words were to be avoided. The quintessential literate register became academic prose; creating an unfortunate, and often invisible, hierarchy in the evaluation of written expression.

Scholars in a range of fields including English language acquisition, education, and composition have highlighted the ways in which literacy is a culturally specific practice that privileges the experiences of particular groups. One consequence of this insight is that it is no longer possible to speak of a single literacy; different social and cultural groups use written language differently. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Paulo Freire, such scholarship has called attention to the ways in which the ideals of "proper literacy" functioned to stigmatize and marginalize written language use that did not reflect the practices of what has come to be known as correct standard written English. This standard has been used to exclude or denigrate the writing of marginalized groups such as recent immigrants or racial/ethnic minorities or to limit access to education for members of these groups (Baker-Bell 2020; Kubota, 2003; Prendergast, 2003; Sterzuk, 2015). By positioning such writers as failing to meet the accepted standards of literate English, educators and schools have been instrumental in defining and enforcing a "color-blind" or blandly "multi-cultural" view of liberal education that leaves standards of whiteness and Eurocentric privilege in place, unspoken and unchallenged (Kubota, 2019; Kubota and Lin, 2009; van Dijk, 1993; Von Esch, Motha, Kubota, 2020; Young, 2010). In making standard written English a benchmark for successful academic achievement, educators (and later employers) are substituting a particular set of language skills for a judgment of worthiness or cultural belonging (Baker-Bell, 2020; Duszak, 2003; Ladva, 2020). Even when conforming to the expectations of standard written English, bodies that did not match the presumed white subject position of the ideal speaker would be evaluated differently or judged as less successful (Baker-Bell, 2020; Ladva, 2020).

The anxiety over what versions of English are valued and who gets to use them is reflected in discourses like Stanley Fish's 2009 *New York Times* column "What Should Colleges Teach Part 3," in which he argues for maintaining a focus on standard English in the college classroom. Acknowledging the social norms and hierarchies that position standard written

English as the most valued form of communication, Fish argues that these structures of privilege are the very reason that faculty must insist on it as the language of the composition classroom. Fish's argument was powerfully critiqued by Vershawn Ashanti Young (2010) in his seminal essay, "Should Writers Use They Own English?". As Young notes, when Fish insists that allowing students to speak or write in their own cultural forms makes them "vulnerable to prejudice" Fish is wrongly placing the responsibility for discriminatory attitudes and institutions on the writers themselves (p.110). It is not their linguistic choices that create the vulnerability, rather it is the systems of power and privilege, including standard language ideology, that are creating and upholding such prejudice.

Recognizing this long and problematic history of literacy as a tool of exclusion, Elbow (2012) further argues that proper literacy is not just at war with the *written* language practices of subordinate populations—it is at war with spoken language itself. Propriety in writing, as measured by correctness in grammar, vocabulary and register becomes the standard against which all spoken language use is also evaluated. Elbow (2012) shows how the primacy of proper literacy as the benchmark of language use has created what he terms "propriety anxiety" for both writers and speakers (p. 355). Proper English reflects very particular notions of middle-class values such as "respectability, decorum or propriety, moderation or temperance" (Elbow, p. 354). "Somehow," Elbow notes, "the propriety conventions in our culture say that good speech should be like good writing" and that the best speakers match the ideals of historically white middle-class American identity (p. 355).

Thus, inspired by the work of scholars such as Young, Lippi-Green, Ladva, and Elbow, we call upon all of us engaged in the work of speaking in higher education to consistently question our systems of linguistic privilege and their accompanying attitudes about individual value and worthiness. The costs of not doing so may be high. Students who approach communication centers primed to think through the lens of proper literacy may silence or devalue their own voices and ideas. Faculty beginning from this framework may craft assignments and provide assessments that further reinforce existing social and linguistic hierarchies. As communication center professionals, we have the opportunity to reflect upon our discourses about speaking and language and how they may potentially reinforce or challenge the reduction of "speaking well" to the oral performance of standard edited written English with all the racial and class assumptions that are built into that formulation.

Looking at our Own Discourses

For this analysis, we gathered examples of tip sheets, videos, and other materials available online from a wide range of centers at American colleges and universities that provide oral communication support to students and faculty. We searched individual center pages as well as doing Google searches for "communication centers," "speech centers," and "speech tip sheets" and included all the materials we were able to access without a particular institutional log in or other required credential—those available to a public audience. We then conducted a textual analysis of these materials. Textual analysis is an inductive process that uses techniques of close reading to identify common themes, prominent ways of framing, and unstated assumptions that are present in a particular text. Both authors reviewed the materials initially to look for elements, ideas, or examples of the ways in which the materials defined speaking well. As we compared our observations, we noted that texts that explicitly included ideas about both writing and speaking practices were a prominent site of examples of "proper literacy" assumptions and could be productively analyzed in more detail. While it is standard practice in textual analysis to cite the source of the texts that serve as the objects of inquiry, in this case, like in Harris' 2010 analysis, we have chosen not to include the source of the examples used in the analysis. Our goal is not to "call out" any examples but instead to look across the materials we as a community are producing in order to see if there are patterns of content or structures that we may be creating which unintentionally reinforce proper literacy or standard language ideology so that we can productively "re-think and revise what we are offering to our institutional readers" (Harris, 2010, p. 49). Specifically, we offer the possibility of a particular reading of the classical idea of *techne* as one powerful tool to aid us in that revision of our center discourses. In addition, we do not aim to generalize all communication centers or all the materials they produce with the findings of this analysis. Instead, we identify dominant themes among the resources analyzed and discuss their implications for cultural constructions of writing and speaking.

Overall, although we found a range of materials published by American college and university communication centers, we have chosen in this essay to focus on two common genres of tip sheets and advice pages, those that include discussion of both speaking and writing as these are particularly vulnerable to the hierarchies of proper literacy. Though the two types of discourses would seem to rest on opposite assumptions, our analysis illustrates that the constraints of proper literacy and its underlying hierarchy of normative identity often grounds the notions of successful speaking for both discourses.

Speaking and Writing are Different

At first, center materials that begin from the premise that speaking and writing are distinct and different modes of communication would seem to be employing a strong strategy for escaping the limiting confines of proper literacy. After all, they begin from the premise that "the spoken word differs from the written." But despite making that initial distinction, the specific differences that the materials go on to explain often do not address the ideology of standard English or the ways in which linguistic hierarchies are established and maintained. Several centers offer pages, posts, or tip sheets that talk about how difficult writing is—often contrasting it with the "ease" of speaking. One page says that, "Unlike talking, which all normal children learn on their own in the process of growing up, writing needs to be taught and requires the use of tools." Another online resource similarly notes that, "reading and writing are consciously learned behaviors while the ability to speak is acquired naturally." Though these resources are trying to help speakers/writers overcome anxiety and increase their confidence, this formulation makes speaking into something that one can either do (if one is "normal" or "natural") or not do. But speaking, whether at home or in the classroom is certainly a learned set of behaviors and rules. The elision of those rules in these examples does not erase their impact and certainly does not help students to become more effective oral communicators in the classroom and beyond. And by ignoring the ways in which speaking is learned, these resources leave the 'rules' of standard English and proper literacy in place, as simply presumed standards that are value-neutral. Students who struggle with speaking here are implicitly somehow "naturally" deficient.

When resources position speaking in classroom settings as their focus, they often contrast speaking and writing by focusing on what they define as differences in "formality" or "complexity" between the two modes. For example, one tip sheet claims that oral language needs to be less dense and jargon-laden and that "simplicity in language is crucial to conveying information effectively." Oral discourse is then contrasted to written language by noting that "when written papers are read out loud, they almost never make effective speeches." Another sheet's instruction on focusing on the delivery of messages explains that writing and speaking are "significantly different," stating that speaking is less lexically dense, as it uses "more personal pronouns;" is less complex because speeches rely on "shorter thought units;" and is less formal because speaking is more "lively and conversational." This tip section is particularly significant as it indicates that the differences between speaking and writing it presents are adapted from a prominent public speaking textbook and thus this particular formulation likely reaches a much wider audience than just those who would encounter this sheet. In addition to failing to challenge the written word as the standard for speech, with all the associated racial and class hierarchies that subtend it, these handouts also reinforce an erroneous notion that it is lexical complexity that makes speaking distinct from writing. When assessing complexity, however, these sheets are using the standards of complexity associated with writing. In writing, complexity is measured by lexical density. If that standard is applied to speaking, then by definition speaking will appear less complex.

Yet Halliday (1989) argues that speaking evinces its own kind of complexity that he characterizes as "choreographic" (p. 66). According to this standard, which measures patterns of how clauses are organized, speaking could be thought of as *more complex* than writing. Indeed, Halliday argues, because we begin from writing as the standard for grammar and linguistic complexity, we have not "learnt to write choreographic grammars" that assess the source of speaking's complexity: the flow and dynamic mobility of spoken language (p. 67). Thus, the problem in all these formulations of turning "papers into speeches" is that while our advice tells students to embrace the qualities that make speaking different from writing, the *ideals of writing (and thus of proper literacy) continue to serve as an underlying standard of evaluation* (for complexity of ideas, density, propriety, language, etc.) that constrains the possibilities of both modes of communication. Seeing speaking as its own distinct art, learned in different ways than writing and with a grammar and structure untethered to writing, may open more possibilities for moving away from this formulation.

Write Your Speech

Another strategy some communication center materials use to instruct students is to encourage them to write out their speech. With this approach, speaking is associational—that is, students are encouraged to think about the production of speeches as akin to the writing of essays. Again, this is not surprising, some college speeches and essays can evince similar structural elements. Yet it is not a question of what they have in common so much as how we encourage students to envision those commonalities. For example, in discussing thesis statements one center encourages students to “develop a thesis statement just as you would for a paper.” On one hand this makes sense, students are encouraged to perform a task they are familiar with. On the other hand, asking students to conceptualize written thesis statements for speeches through the lens of developing thesis statements for an essay conflates the positions of speaker and writer. In doing so students are left to call on how they have been instructed to write thesis statements for formal academic essays. As with much of college writing, the development of thesis statements is generally subtended by the ideal of proper literacy. If we are asking students to prepare speeches based on practices of academic writing they are already being taught, should it surprise us that their speeches are predicated on the values of correctness, grammar, vocabulary and register that are associated with academic prose?

When a speaking assignment asks the student to begin from a piece of academic writing, the challenge is even greater. Some centers have tip sheets focused on the tricky proposition of “turning a paper into a speech.” Many tip sheets/pages that start from this idea encourage students to “lift” their thesis or main ideas from the paper to form the thesis/main points of their speech, to “condense” their long research paper into a shorter presentation, to “strip down” their arguments, or to even to “plug in” the topic sentences from their paper into a speech outline. All of these constructions rest on the assumption that the writing is the primary means of communicating the message and that the speech is a “reduced” or bare bones version of that message. As one page explicitly asks, how can a student “condense the intricacies of a month’s worth of research and analysis into just 10 short minutes?”

One example suggests that the student views the paper as the outline for the future speech. The speaker simply needs to “pull the information out” and “possibly reorganize it.” This advice positions the student firmly in the position of using writing as the foundational form of language with speaking as secondary and indebted to all the same standards and ideals two of the five steps for creating an “effective” presentation offered on the sheet are then framed explicitly as written practice: “write the introduction” and “write the conclusion.” Since the student using this tip sheet already has both a written introduction and conclusion in their paper, it seems likely that this advice encourages the speaker to simply use the language from the paper itself as the basis for these sections. This creates a situation in which a student is being repeatedly encouraged to think of speaking as "reading aloud" rather than as a distinct linguistic art that relies on different rules and practices than writing.

Other approaches to speech development that we found in the center materials encourage students to compose their speeches by "writ[ing] how you talk." While this advice might seem harmless and a good way to get students started if they are stuck, it does not address the ways in which American higher education classrooms privilege very particular ways of speaking that are grounded in proper literacy. One needs only to remember Fish's (2009) insistence on the need for "standard English" to recognize that not all ways students "talk" will function similarly in such environments. Many tip sheets/videos that encourage students to write like they talk emphasize using a "conversational" style. Yet the conversations we see in the classroom and other formal spaces rarely involve students expressing themselves in what Young (2010) calls "they own English." Given this context in much of higher education, when, when we advise students to write "how they talk," we have to consider whose speech patterns we are actually inviting and how even example speeches and speakers who we show as "conversational" may still be governed by the underlying ideals of proper literacy.

Resisting Proper Literacy as the Standard

It is not easy to escape the confines of proper literacy and its expectations, particularly in the realm of U.S. higher education. For most of us, they have been in the background of our own educations since our first school experiences. But we argue that making the effort to do so is invaluable because of the myriad of ways in which the unspoken standards of proper literacy constrain our students' abilities to speak well and undermine our efforts to create inclusive and equitable spaces for all students. Some centers are certainly working to draw more explicit attention to cultural ideas about "good" English or "good" writing, which is encouraging, and we applaud these efforts. However, we remain concerned that the pervasiveness of standards of proper literacy and standard written English can undermine the effectiveness of such efforts. This is particularly true when so many example speeches and speech assignments that students may encounter across the curriculum continue to privilege speaking and writing that conforms to those normative expectations.

While this essay is too short to explore all the work needed to make the academy into a space in which speakers are celebrated for utilizing their own cultural languages and can tap into their full creativity and energy in ways that empower and motivate their listeners, we do think that the rhetorical tradition of *techne* may offer one useful starting point.

Techne

Janet Atwill's 1998 book *Rhetoric Reclaimed* is an explicit attempt to break the notion of a "normative subject" of liberal arts education away from an unspoken and dangerous cultural homogeneity (p. 2). Atwill argues persuasively that liberal arts education created as part of its formulation, an ideal "universal" subject of a democratic society. Although positioned as unmarked, such a subject was nevertheless always linked to particular notions of class, race, and gender. This normative subject of the liberal arts has much in common with the cultural construct of "proper literacy" and "standard English" as they have functioned to devalue or even erase those who differ from the presumed and unstated cultural standard. Against this dangerous universalization, Atwill proposes to resurrect the concept of *techne* from the work of Protagoras, Isocrates, Aeschylus, and Hesiod. She notes that although *techne* goes through several specific formulations in Athenian rhetorical traditions, it always maintains three key features:

1. A *techne* is never a static, normative body of knowledge. A *techne* is described as a *dynamis* (or power) and a set of transferable strategies, both contingent on situation and purpose…
2. A *techne* resists identification with a normative subject…every exchange of a techne creates a different order of power--different subjectivities...
3. *Techne* marks a domain of human intervention and invention...A *techne* is knowledge as production, not product; intervention and articulation, rather than representation. (p. 7)

Atwill's definition helps us to see the power of the concept of *techne* as a starting point for developing discourses of effective speaking that resist the limits of "propriety," standard language ideology, and the normative subject discussed here. By reconfiguring the power and process of speaking as one that co-creates the speaker and the functions of the speech itself, *techne* offers us a tool to resist blanket notions of propriety--to begin to free the speaker and their words from the confines of proper literacy.

One place for injecting this notion of *techne* into our speaking guides and materials might be to reframe our materials around the key rhetorical concepts of speaker, occasion, audience, and purpose rather orienting speaking in relation to writing (either as similar or different). By presenting and formulating speaking as a practice defined by these interrelated and fluid components, we can help speakers (and faculty evaluators) to conceptualize speaking effectiveness less as a particular "product" and more as the process of making choices and employing strategies that are adaptive to shifting circumstances and audiences. The "same" speech must look and sound different when presented at different times, for different audiences, and as the speaker themself evolves and changes as a communicator. Success is measured by assessing the choices made as creative and powerful responses to the shifting environment, rather than adhering to preconceived notions of a speech that sounds "pretty."

We can (and certainly some centers already do) reframe our "tip sheets" less as answers to students' questions about speaking assignments and more as guided questions that designate the student as the agent—the one making key choices to succeed with their chosen audience. Instead of comparing speaking to writing (either as similar or different) we can define speaking as a dynamic process that actively creates identities, knowledge, and attitudes in concert with the audience. This removes speaking from the students' experiences with writing and allows for a greater space in which to push back against the widespread cultural presumptions of proper literacy that are so pervasive throughout American education. We can help students to ask themselves questions that are more about harnessing their power as speakers and using it creatively. A few examples of starting questions might be:

- Who are you relative to the audience that you want to address? Who are they? How can you make those identities clear to your listeners in a way that is authentic and powerful?
- Why should your audience listen to you and how can you make that clear to them?
- What does your audience already know about you, your topic, or the event at which you are speaking? How can you focus your speech to meet them where they are?
- What types of evidence or examples will be the most resonant and relevant for both you and your audience? How do you know? How can you best present your argument to your audience in a way that showcases the power of your evidence?
- What do you hope will happen during and after your speech? What can you say and do to try to make that happen? How is your speech going to enact some change in you, your audience, or your context?

Questions framed like this can help students to see themselves as the ones engaging in purposeful and powerful rhetorical *techne* and center student thought and reasoning without assuming academic discourse as the default starting point for public speaking.

We can also use our guides and materials to help students and faculty see that effective speaking at times may be quite different and even disruptive compared to examples they may have seen in school before. Atwill cites Tacitus's *Dialogue on Oratory*, to highlight the dynamic and disruptive nature of rhetoric as a social force. Arguing against the traditions advanced by Quintilian, Tacitus forcefully explains that:

> [Rhetoric] is not a quiet and peaceable art, or one that finds satisfaction in moral worth and good behavior; no; really great and famous oratory is a foster-child of license, which foolish men called liberty, an associate of sedition…Devoid of reverence, it is insulting, off-hand, and overbearing. It is a plant that does not grow under a well-regulated constitution. (cited in Atwill 1998, p. 5)

Choosing wider ranging examples of powerful speakers and speeches is obviously a good idea anyway, but we can more explicitly help our own audiences to see the disruptive and creative power of those examples if we frame their disruption as the result of particular rhetorical choices made by the speakers that fit within their unique context.

We can also use this notion of speaking as a *techne* or social action to stress the value of speech preparation and practice. Instead of such preparatory work being thought of as a way to correct "mistakes," which can end up reinforcing underlying standards of proper literacy, we can liken great speaking to other great forms of art and action—other powerful examples of techne. No one would expect a musician to write or perform a hit song without a lot of hard work. Similarly, great speeches require a lot of preparation, revision, and practice. It is this work that lets speakers learn to craft their voice, to see the wide range of possibilities open to them in any given situation, to develop their tools to make better choices in their particular settings, and best accomplish their goals. Speaking thought of as a *techne* is not just "different than writing" but is a living, breathing example of social action and power. In other words, reconceptualizing the performance of speaking through *techne* offers our students an opportunity to recognize the dynamic nature of speaking as a process of creation (of knowledge and identity) that can resist and even transform limiting notions of what are "proper" or "appropriate" ways to use language.

We certainly do not envision that *techne* alone will be enough to overcome the pervasive cultural force of proper literacy or the ubiquitous cultural associations between “correct” writing and “good” speech, or even that it can, or even should, be part of all of our center materials. We need many tools and many approaches—indeed, our own *techne* should evolve with our centers and our audiences! We offer here just the start, one way to use *techne* as a tool to center the process of creation at the heart of rhetorical practice, potentially opening up new possibilities for helping students and faculty begin to tap into the incredible force of spoken language.

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