

I Just Want to Be Like Everyone Else:
Teaching public speaking to an
exceptional student

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Abstract

Teaching public speaking is often part of a junior high or senior high curriculum as well as a part of the college curriculum of many four-year public institutions whereby a student is expected to demonstrate performance skills to an audience. For the exceptional student with disabilities, this presents more than the usual anxieties that beset most students in typical oral communication classes. When those disabilities encompass both severe physical limitations and vocal mechanism problems, this presents an additional set of special challenges.

The classroom situation described here took place in a required communication class where Oral Communication is a requirement for graduation. Because of this student's severe limitations with both restricted physical movements as well as vocal limitations, this student was given the opportunity to "opt out". He chose not to opt out; he did not want to be "different" from his peers. This is a true story of an exceptional student who arose to meet the challenge of wanting to be treated "just like everybody else". I believe it would be of benefit to any instructor, as well as any college student pursuing their teaching credentials, to read this story and regard the insights it contains.

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As a teacher of a public speaking class, I have had different types of students in my classroom; those who enrolled because they were required to, those who enrolled because they wanted to, those who came looking for self-confidence and those who were merely curious about what I had to offer. But teaching public speaking for the past several years had not prepared me to teach a student with significant physical and vocal limitations, the least of which was a serious impairment in his ability to be understood. Up until this time in my career I had not realized how shortsighted I had become in my intellectual and emotional understanding regarding a student's heartfelt desire to communicate on an equal basis with his peers on whatever level "equal basis" implied.

"Danny" (not his real name) enrolled in one of my sections of Introduction to Oral Communication for the spring semester. There was nothing unusual about that. However, Danny was not your typical student. Like most students he came to class prepared with his notebook and his computer. He also came to class in an electric wheelchair arriving via the noisy building elevator that led to my classroom on the second floor. Danny dealt with several physical limitations that severely limited his ability to move. He could occasionally rise with enormous effort by struggling out of his wheelchair and leaning his weight against a solid object. However, he could only do this for a few minutes. He had partial but limited use of one hand; the other hand lay withered in his lap.

Writing for him was extremely difficult and he relied upon a computer to aid him in taking notes. His speaking ability could

best be described as difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend.

He spoke in a slurred fashion and could be understood only with great difficulty. His communication was further complicated by a constant cough and periodic gasping noises which were accentuated whenever he laughed. I was never privy to his medical diagnosis; it was part of his private medical record. His mental capabilities were normal. I learned during the semester that his major was Computer Information Systems. I have described his situation here so that the reader would have a better understanding of his physical limitations upon entering this environment.

I was introduced to Danny on a Monday morning, a week prior to the start of the semester when his grandfather, Danny and I met for a conference. The obvious question from his grandfather: "How did I feel about having Danny in an Oral Communication class where the primary emphasis would be on public speaking?" I was not exactly sure how I felt inside; my response to his grandfather was "that we would deal with any concerns as they arose". Thinking back I am sure I looked more confident outside than I was feeling inside at that moment. Danny's schedule required a morning class and, although Oral Communication is a required subject, Danny could have opted out due to his situation. Danny was quite specific during our conference; he did not WANT to "opt out". His grandfather would guarantee his timely arrival each morning. Classroom assignments would be completed by computer since writing was almost impossible for him. "Would I accept in-class writing assignments that came electronically?" "Yes", I said, "That

would not be a problem.” It was clear to me from our initial meeting that Danny was determined to complete this class. I could see him closely monitoring my face for any sign of reaction. I sat poker-faced. Having a student like Danny was going to be a new experience for me even though I was an experienced teacher. He kept repeating his only request until I understood it: "Please treat me like everybody else!" If there was going to be any difficulty with the class assignments then we would cross those bridges when we came to them. If there was going to be any problem with the situation, it was going to be of my own making. Danny was determined to pass Oral Communication in the same way as everyone else. I secretly wondered how he would cope with the multiple oral assignments that take place in a class like this where he would be in front of the room delivering individual speeches, but I kept those thoughts to myself.

During the Sunday before the first day of class was to begin, we were deluged with a major snowstorm. On Monday most of the students made it to class but Danny was not among them. My emotions were mixed. Was I feeling relief or was it consternation? I had prepared an elaborate explanation for the class about Danny's situation. I think back on those feelings now and all I feel is ashamed. Danny's situation did not require an explanation. I seemed to have conveniently forgotten about his only request: "Please treat me like everybody else".

When I entered the classroom on Wednesday for the second class meeting, Danny was sitting by himself in the corner of the room closest to the door. He had arrived before everyone else. His grandfather greeted me and then made sure

that Danny was comfortable before leaving us alone. A few minutes before the class began, the other students began filing into the room and took their seats laughing, talking and forming new friendships as most freshmen do at the beginning of a semester. No student approached Danny, no one befriended him, no one made any overture at all towards him or even acknowledged his presence in the classroom.

I always began every new semester with an icebreaker. Students repeat the names of their classmates in a memory game where they say the name of each student starting with the student in the first seat and ending with the student in the last seat until they have each repeated all the names. The first student says my name and adds his own name; the student behind him repeats my name, the first student's name, adds his own name and so on. This has never failed to ease the tension of first week jitters in a class where public speaking is high on everyone's anxiety meter. It also gives the students in the class a chance to relax and, in a class where critiquing each other and learning each other's names is crucial, this simple activity has proven very successful over the years in making everyone laugh as they sympathize with their classmate's struggle to recall the names of the students.

But this time would be different. Danny was the first student in the first seat. Considering the difficulty he would have in repeating any name aloud, coupled with the strain that he was already under, I was in a quandary. I could not ignore him but it seemed cruel to place him in an oral memory game. I thought back to his plea of equal treatment and forged ahead. There were only two names he needed to say to begin; my name and his name. It

took him about two minutes to repeat both names. I am sure it seemed endless to Danny as he struggled to get the sounds out but he accomplished it and his face relaxed a little.

I had been so busy thinking about my own emotions and how Danny would handle this situation that I had forgotten about his classmates' reactions. As they listened to Danny desperately trying to repeat my name as well as his own amid his difficulty in breathing, their thoughts were plainly displayed on their faces. Some students looked sad, some looked confused, some turned away, others looked resentful, a few looked hostile and the rest merely curious. But by the end of the game everyone had repeated Danny's name and even he joined in the laughter as his classmates tried to remember the names of so many new faces, especially those with more difficult sounding names. It was a beginning.

The third day of class brought forward another situation. Students in all sections of the Oral Communication class at this institution were required to select a classmate, compose a two-minute Speech of Introduction and deliver it during the following class. They were to interview each other during this class to obtain their information. Students quickly scrambled for partners and it became painfully obvious that whoever was left would become Danny's partner. If you have ever seen the hurt look on a boy's face when he is the last to be chosen for a sandlot baseball team, then you can conjure up Danny's face that day. Eventually one boy in the second row, "Bobby" (not his real name), was also without a partner. He swung his chair next to Danny's wheelchair and they began a discussion. Their conversation was primarily one-sided but

they appeared to be making progress; they continued talking until Danny's grandfather came to take him home.

The introductory speeches began the following class meeting. Danny was the first to arrive in class that day. In the basket of his wheelchair were his notes on Bobby and what he planned to say to introduce his new friend to the class. His face showed excitement and I was glad to know that this would give him some initial feelings of success watching Bobby's reactions.

The minutes ticked by prior to the start of class; Danny's eyes were glued to the door. Bobby had not yet arrived and class was starting. As each member of the pair introduced their partner to the class, Danny's face became more anxious. Finally it was Danny's turn to introduce Bobby and Bobby was still not there.

Amidst a slow, halting delivery in a barely discernable voice with a list of newly discovered attributes about his new friend, Danny delivered his speech. His two-minute speech lasted fifteen minutes. Again came the looks from his classmates but this time the looks were directed at me. Those looks were questioning: "How should we respond? What should we do? Should we pretend that we understood what he said?" In Danny's defense you could understand a few of the words but only with a concentrated effort. At the end of Danny's speech I clapped and the students followed suit. That was enough for now; another hurdle passed.

At the next class Bobby was in attendance and, although all of the other introductory speeches had been completed, we had not heard Bobby's speech about Danny. Bobby skipped the usual "where my partner grew up" and began to talk specifically about Danny's medical

situation. He informed us that Danny was a Computer Science major and quite the Webmaster, a fact not lost on students who require a high level of computer expertise. Bobby made it eloquently clear that Danny was not seeking special treatment; he only wanted to be treated like everybody else. Throughout Bobby's speech, Danny never took his eyes off Bobby's face. He looked anxious but pleased. Another hurdle passed, another class completed.

As the semester progressed, all students were required to perform four graded presentations. At the end of every presentation, speeches were critiqued and students were free to ask questions about the content, research and delivery aspects of the work. Danny's speeches could not be excluded if he was to receive equal treatment. His classmates became quickly adept at bringing to Danny's attention where and when they felt his fluency had improved, an example had been easier to understand, his eye contact had become more focused or his research was amiss. It was the kindest and most affirming critique I had ever heard from a class. They gave him fair and honest criticism; praising him for his hard work and constructively suggesting ideas. They gave him encouragement when he faltered and waited patiently until they could comprehend a portion of what he was saying. As the weeks passed, what was once curiosity, hostility or confusion from his classmates was being replaced by admiration and respect for his courage. They were also treating each other with more respect than I have ever seen in previous Oral Communication classes.

As the semester continued, the majority of the class was growing more protective of Danny's efforts. It was clear that Danny had been practicing his speeches and that

they remembered many aspects of his earlier presentations. They ignored the time limits and they never once looked at the clock as they might do during other students' presentations. Throughout each of his speeches, Danny often had to pause while he coughed or wheezed for breath. Whenever this happened, his audience waited patiently. When it was their turn at the podium and Danny had a coughing episode, they would pause in their own speech until he recovered. They were becoming a closely knit group.

As usually happens in most Oral Communication classes, the last speech is usually the toughest since it requires the most effort. It was apparent that Danny wanted this final speech to also be his finest effort in Oral Communication. It was obvious that he had been practicing very hard. When it came time for Danny's final presentation, he directed his wheelchair to the front and center of the room and then stationed it behind the desk. This was something he had never done before. With enormous self-will, he raised himself up out of his wheelchair and stood before his classmates for the first time supported by the limited strength he possessed in his arms. For Danny's final presentation to his classmates, he was going to stand at the podium just like everybody else. He was supported by the desk on one side but no one cared or even acknowledged it. He was going to conclude this course by standing alone in the front of the room and giving his final presentation as free of his wheelchair as he could manage. There was not a dry eye in the room when he finished and the ovation at the end from his audience was deafening. A final obstacle beaten and we were awestruck. No one left that classroom that day the same way they had

entered three months earlier. We watched another human being thwart every obstacle in his path and beat them back. We never applauded a speech like we did that day.

Having had Danny in my classroom has taught me many things. First, how important we are to our own success depends much more on how much we rely upon one another. Secondly, I have learned how truly dependent upon one another we are to truly express our thoughts and our inner feelings. Third, our success comes not in how much we think of what we do but in how it is perceived by others. When students sign up for one of my future classes, I will realize that they come for different reasons. Some come looking to me for belonging, some come looking for answers, some come because they have to, others are seeking hope or solace while still others look to me for compassion and understanding. Perhaps the finest thing we can hope to teach our students amidst our theorems and our axioms is to realize that most students just want acceptance, to communicate on whatever level they can and just to be a little bit better off and a little bit happier than when they walked in. How did Danny put it? Just to truly feel "like everybody else".

In the years that have passed since I had Danny in my classroom, I have taught many, many classes of Oral Communication but I have never had another student with such severe physical limitations as Danny. I have had my share of students who stuttered, students who trembled, those that cried or got the look of a deer caught in a car's headlights. I have also had my share of students who swore they would faint dead away if they had to come up to the podium and give a speech. I have learned so much from Danny. It's

not so much what I teach them about public speaking as it is how much I show them compassion and share understanding. It is not so much in the knowledge of the mind as it is in the sharing of the heart.

I never learned what finally became of Danny after he graduated with his degree in Computer Science but the picture of him standing at that podium is still firmly etched in my memory; Danny standing alone leaning against the podium, propped up against the desk for all the world to see. For that moment in time, Danny was standing alone but accepted, "just like everybody else".

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