Revisioning the Public Speaking Course

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Rationale

Scholars committed to expanding the communication discipline to incorporate an understanding of the communication practices of oppressed groups, whether women, African Americans, Hispanics, or others, discover that this commitment inevitably raises questions about and challenges many traditional notions of communication. From such a perspective, revered and standard foundations of our discipline are discovered to exclude alternative perspectives on communication.

Those scholars with assignments to teach public speaking who are engaged in this process of questioning and revising notions of communication eventually find themselves calling into question the substance of the public speaking course. They come to discover that this substance privileges a white male world view and the value system it represents. In particular, the course seems designed to enable students to achieve success in the corporate world, where the white male is standard and where hierarchy, control over others, and ends over means are valued. Such knowledge is useful for everyone because we must work in and respond to the corporate world. To privilege the kind of speaking valued in such a world at the exclusion of others means, however, that public speaking instructors are not teaching, or even recognizing as legitimate, the diverse speaking goals, contexts, and approaches of those whose communicative practices and interests lie outside of it.

What follows is a summary of the basic public speaking course revised to integrate feminist and Afrocentric principles typically neglected in traditional approaches to public speaking. The objectives for students in the course are: (1) To develop communication skills that facilitate the development of critical understanding, subjecting their ideas and experiences to others' scrutiny as a means to grasp, interpret, and evaluate information, issues, and the interests and values underly-

ing them; and (2) To develop speaking strategies and skills appropriate to a variety of goals, audiences, and contexts. The principles taught, the skills students practice, and the standards of evaluation are designed to meet these two primary goals, with options for fulfillment expanded beyond traditional conceptions to include feminist and Afrocentric principles of communication.

The material presented that is derived from Afrocentric or feminist perspectives is not explicitly identified as such in the course; it simply is presented to the students as the standard content. My rationale is that the labeling of particular material as derived from specific perspectives might discourage students from using these options in their speeches because they are not feminist or African American. In addition, some students react negatively to discussions that are explicitly Afrocentric or feminist in orientation, a reaction that might discourage their acceptance and use of materials derived from these perspectives. Students in the revised course do not seem to view the material from these alternative perspectives as unusual and use many of the options such material provides in their own presentations in the class.

Content

The course centers on the speaker's selection of a speaking goal or goals, with the other topics covered in the course presented as options among which students may select to accomplish those goals most effectively. The topics covered are audience analysis and adaptation, organizational patterns, and forms of support. The substance of these topics is summarized in lectures at the beginning third of the course, with the last two thirds of the course devoted to students' speeches. For some of the topics, such as audience analysis, the approach is the same as it would be in a traditional public speaking course. For other topics, however, the subject matter is changed considerably. The sections that follow summarize the content of the topics where major deviation occurs from standard approaches.

Speaking Goals

In contrast to the traditional view that the three primary speaking goals are to persuade, to inform, and to celebrate, this course features five speaking goals. One is *to articulate a perspective*, which is not the

same as the traditional goal of persuasion. This speech is not designed to control the perceptions, actions, and thoughts of the audience in order to secure its submission to the speaker's viewpoint or perspective. Instead, the speaker articulates a perspective in order to enhance her or his own critical understanding and that of others. In order for a particular point of view to be presented in the most articulate manner possible, the speaker must have a thorough understanding of all positions on and dimensions of the issues.

A second kind of speaking has as its goal *to assert individuality*. Although all speakers continually engage in communication that reveals who they are as persons, in some instances this is the specific and primary speaking goal. With this as the focus of a speech, speakers seek self-identification, projection of their personalities, assertion of the self, or identity management to facilitate others' understanding of their perspectives. Examples of speeches in which this goal is privileged include professors' introduction of themselves on the first day of class, job seekers' communication during an interview, and a first meeting or conversation with another person.

A third speaking goal presented in the course is *to maintain community*, a goal that may be directed at maintaining harmony in a community where it already exists or restoring harmony when it has been disrupted. Two primary assumptions underlie this type of speech: the stability of the community is essential, and the collective common good is valued over the individual good. In this type of speaking, speakers place a high premium on the "we" identity over the "I," and the speech is geared toward others rather than toward personal gain. In fact, in this kind of speech, a self-focus, no matter how gifted or imaginative, is damaging to the speaker. Because there is no sharp division between the speaker and audience in this speech, communication is collective, with virtually everyone both performing and listening. Audience members actively acknowledge speakers, and when a speaker is being seen or heard, so, too, is the audience. Examples of this kind of speaking include a pep talk to members of an athletic team, a staff meeting called to resolve conflict, or ritual communication such as that at weddings or baby showers.

The fourth speaking goal is *to discover knowledge or belief*, a goal that is primary in speeches in which the speaker and audience

embark on a joint search for knowledge. In this communicative situation, which is necessarily dialogic and cooperative, the speaker and audience are unsure of their opinions and beliefs and seek to discover or sort them out together. Audience analysis and adaptation are particularly important in guiding this process so that the communication of one individual or group does not dominate the discussion and become a persuasive imposition of views on others.

A fifth kind of speech has as its goal *to resist*. This is liberated speaking that questions and confronts a system. Speaking organized around resistance is different from traditional persuasive speaking, in which speakers simply seek modification in a condition within a particular system. In speaking to resist, the speaker is confronting the system itself; it is a confrontation that involves separation of some kind from that system. Through the speaker's words and actions, she or he stays apart from and eschews the terms of the system, thus redefining it in some way so that new perspectives and behaviors are allowed to develop. Such resistance is exemplified by the characters played by Whoopie Goldberg and Sissy Spacek in the film, *The Long Walk Home*, when they resist physical and verbal attack by singing a gospel hymn. Feminist activist Starhawk and her coadjutors also demonstrated this type of resistance in response to their imminent beating by prison guards: The women simply sat down and began to chant quietly, prompting bewilderment and withdrawal by the guards (Starhawk 5).

Organizational Patterns

One way students accomplish their speaking goals is through the organizational pattern of the speech. Traditional patterns are covered in the course, including the motivated sequence and chronological, problem-solution, and topical approaches to organization.

Other patterns are introduced as well, ones more likely to reflect the speaking forms valued in feminist and Afrocentric perspectives. Among these are the *metaphor* pattern, in which the speech is based on a comparison between two things; a *narrative* pattern, or story form; and *complementary opposites*, where opposites (such as organic and mechanical, day and night, subject and object) are used to generate ideas and diverse contributions to thinking about an issue. In the *web* pattern, a speech has a core idea, with its various parts related to that core in equal fashion: the various dimensions of the topic are explored in turn, with

a continual returning to and branching out from the core. In the *circle* pattern, the speaker begins with one idea, which leads to another, which leads to another, and which then leads back to the original idea. A *Rogerian* pattern, rooted in the work of Carl Rogers, is designed to increase communication in both directions and is based on the fact that if people feel they are understood, they will cease to feel a sense of threat and can listen to and consider others' ways of seeing. This pattern involves first a demonstration of an understanding of the listener's position, followed by a presentation of ideas in light of what was learned about the other's position.

The discussion of the organization of speeches also includes a discussion of speech plans, an idea borrowed from Linda Flower (117-29). The speech plan is used as an organizing tool for students' ideas in place of the standard speech outline. The traditional outline form requires a linear, chronological approach to a topic that does not always work well with many of the non-standard organizational patterns and forms of support presented as options to students in the course. Students are asked to submit speech plans for all of their speeches, with each plan due on the day the speech is presented.

A speech plan is intended to ensure that students think about the options available to them in preparing their speeches in light of their speaking goals. It includes five elements. First, students are asked to provide a *nutshell*, a brief description of the gist or essence of the speech; this is a capsule statement of the speech content. Next, students state the *speaking goal or goals* they are trying to achieve: to articulate a perspective, assert individuality, maintain community, discover knowledge, or resist. A third component of the speech plan is a definition of the *audience* envisioned for the speech. The body of the speech plan consists of an *issue tree*, a visual depiction of the major ideas of the speech and the relationships among them. An issue tree looks very much like an upside-down tree that puts the ideas of the speech into some kind of order. These ideas are presented in general fashion; the speech plan does not require intricate detailing of every minor point to be covered in the speech. Finally, the speech plan includes a list of the primary *forms of support* the students plan to use in their speeches, such as definition, tonal semantics, and statistics; students are not asked to provide the content of those forms but simply to name the types they will use.

Forms of Support

The forms of support presented as options for the students to use in developing their ideas include the traditional ones of explanation, comparison and contrast, narrative, statistics, testimony, restatement, definition, sensory images, and emotional appeal. But others, derived from feminist and Afrocentric principles, also are presented. *Proverbs* are short, succinct statements that encapsulate a culture's wisdom, and *myths* are stories that capture basic psychic patterns by which cultures organize experiences. *Facility with verbal language* recognizes that the form of expression can be as important as the content presented. Such facility may include: spontaneity, responding quickly to whatever comes into the speaking situation; exaggeration; punning; and indirection, gradually closing in on a point or "stalking" the issue, toying with related ideas and concepts before focusing on the prime target. *Tonal semantics* is the use of words and phrases chosen for their sound effects rather than their meaning; examples are rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. *Audience response or participation* may serve as a form of support in that such activity affirms the ideas being developed by the speaker. It may assume a variety of forms, including the asking of questions by the speaker and use of the answers to develop ideas; testimonials from the audience; call-response, vocal responses from listeners testifying to the impact of the delivery of the message; and ritual, a happening, event, or enactment that occurs in special or sacred space and is designed to bind people together into a common community. *Self-presentation* deals with the image the speaker presents to the audience. It includes those features that usually are discussed as part of nonverbal communication, such as dress, arrangement of the environment to communicate a particular self-image, facial expression, touch, and vocal tone. *Cues* are the use of guideposts to create and fulfill expectations in the audience and include transition statements and visual aids.

Textbook

A textbook that covers the topics of this course from the revised perspective outlined here does not yet exist. One option for the instructor is to select a brief handbook of public speaking to use as the text; brevity means the book is less likely to have elaborate discussions of concepts that contradict or are irrelevant to the perspective on

communication presented by the instructor. Even with such a handbook, instructors will find they do not want to assign all of the chapters because much of the book's material will be inappropriate. A more useful option may be to use lectures and handouts that incorporate the material on course content covered here.

Assignments

The speeches that typically are assigned in public speaking courses often are trivial or unrelated to the kind of speaking students do or will do in their real lives. In this course, the students develop their own assignments for their four major speeches, designing ones they might be likely to give, either while still in college or in a future career.

Students are asked to design speeches that feature different speaking goals as much as possible, although the same speaking goal may be the objective of more than one speech. A student who plans to work in environmental advocacy, for example, might give a speech encouraging university students to join an environmental organization (articulating a perspective), trying to build community among new staff members (building community), testifying before Congress on an environmental issue (articulating a perspective), and introducing her or himself to staff members as the new head of an environmental organization (asserting individuality). A student who plans to be a high school teacher and basketball coach might give a pep talk to the basketball team (building community), lead a discussion on Shakespeare with a class (discovering knowledge or belief and articulating a perspective), speak to a community boosters' group about the current status of the team (articulating a perspective and building community), and discuss with basketball team members the strategy to use in an upcoming game (discovering knowledge and belief).

The openness of the assignments means that not all of the speeches will fit the traditional mode of public speaking, with a speaker standing up in front of the class. In some cases, the presenter might sit in a circle with the audience members; in other cases, he or she might sit across a table from one other person, who serves as the audience. Before beginning to speak, students tell the class members what kind of audience they are and orient them to the situation for the speech. The student dresses according to the situation envisioned and, if necessary, rearranges the room to fit the speech (both dress and environment have

been presented earlier by the instructor as forms of support for the speaker's ideas).

Speeches are evaluated in the course through two processes, corresponding to the two primary objectives of the course: (1) Assessment of the speaking goal(s); and (2) Assessment of the options selected to accomplish the speaking goal(s). Assessment of the speaker's goal(s) is made in terms of the first objective of the course, to develop communication skills that facilitate the development of critical understanding. The basic question to be asked here is whether the speaker's goal harmonizes with or affirms that goal.

Assessment of the options selected to accomplish the speaker's goals is done in light of the second objective of the course, to develop speaking strategies and skills appropriate to a variety of goals, audiences, and contexts. The basic question asked to assess the options selected by the speaker is whether, out of all the options available to the speaker, the ones selected were those most appropriate for the speaker's goal(s), audience, and the situation; appropriateness thus is the criterion by which effectiveness is assessed. This notion of appropriateness is grounded in a commitment to the creation of an environment that facilitates critical understanding and that reshapes the audience's expectations, if necessary, so that critical understanding becomes the desired outcome for the communicative experience. Appropriateness, then, is not defined, as it usually is, as decorum, conformity to conventions, or a catering to what the speaker perceives the audience wants to hear.

The critique form used to evaluate the speeches is divided into two sections. The first section is "Assessment of Goal(s)," the focus of which is consonance of the goal(s) with facilitating critical understanding. Within the second section, "Appropriateness of Options Selected," two components are included: (1) organizational patterns; and (2) forms of support. These are the two primary categories of options for the development of the speech taught in the course. The instructor writes comments to the student on the form about the primary positive and negative dimensions of the speech in the various categories.

In addition to the speeches and speech plans, the course includes some written assignments. One is a speech overview, submitted early in the term, in which students are asked to introduce the instructor to the themes and contexts of the speeches they will be presenting. It includes the occupation or context for the speeches, audience, gist of the speeches' content, and the speaking goal or goals for each speech. This speech overview is not graded and provides an opportunity for the instructor to work with students to devise speeches with varied speaking goals.

A written exam is also part of the course, but it is an exam designed to test students' abilities to make choices from options for speaking. In the exam, students are asked to imagine that they are giving a speech with a particular speaking goal and a particular audience—a speech to encourage graduating seniors to join the university's alumni association, for example. They are asked to devise introductions, forms of support, organizational patterns, and the like that would be appropriate for this speech.

Sample Speeches

Because of the variety of speaking goals covered in the class, the model speeches provided to the students are more diverse than the models used in traditional public speaking classes. Science-fiction writer and feminist Ursula K. Le Guin's "A Left-Handed Commencement Address" is a model that exemplifies the goal of building community. In this commencement address to the Mills College class of 1983, Le Guin attempts to build community among women; she announces that she is going to talk "like a woman right here in public" and that it "won't sound right. It's going to sound terrible" (115). Her use of complementary opposites as a strategy is evident in her discussions of success and failure; she does not wish success as it is defined traditionally for the graduates but rather asks them to explore women's own country, a world apart from "man's world of institutionalized competition, aggression, violence, authority, and power" (116). She draws on myths and metaphors as supporting material in her description of this women's world as having its roots not in the light or the sky but in the dark, a "dark that nourishes, where human beings grow human souls" (117).

Anne Noggle's "Seeing Ourselves," also a commencement address, was delivered to the class of 1983 at the Portland School of Art in Maine. Photographer and pilot Noggle's speech is a series of personal stories about her life and her perspectives on it, loosely pointing to the

idea that "we have to create our own world . . . a kind of secret place" (30). A stream-of-consciousness organizational pattern and narrative as a primary form of support characterize the speech, designed largely to help her and her audience discover knowledge or belief about the meaning of life.

Performance artist Laurie Anderson's monologues also are useful as models for a variety of forms of support and organizational patterns. Her "New York Social Life" assumes a narrative form and recounts telephone and other conversations characterized by superficiality and lack of authenticity. Resistance and assertion of individuality both seem to be speaking goals for Anderson here.

Any of Jesse Jackson's speeches provide excellent models for forms of support derived particularly from African-American perspectives; a readily accessible one is "The Rainbow Coalition" delivered to the Democratic National Convention in July, 1984. The speech is an example of the goal of building community, and Jackson asks Democratic candidates to forgive each other so that the Party can "regroup and move on" (103). His use of metaphor is evident in his description of a "Rainbow Coalition," in which all "come together" in "a quilt—many patches, many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread" (103). In his challenge to youth, even those born in the slum, to "rise above it" and adopt a perspective of "the sunny side," he exemplifies proverbs, facility with verbal language, and tonal semantics: "When I see a broken window, that's the slummy side. Train some youth to be a glazier, that's the sunny side" (109). These forms of support also are evident at the close of the speech, when he admonishes his audience to choose "the human race over the nuclear race" and to "leave racial battleground and come to economic common ground and moral higher ground" (110).

Another speech text that works well to model some of the expanded forms of support and organizational patterns covered in the course is one of Garrison Keillor's monologues from his weekly radio program, *American Radio Company*, or from his former radio program, *A Prairie Home Companion*, which are available on cassettes (1983, 1985, 1989). These monologues, about the characters in Lake Wobegon, an imaginary town in Minnesota, exemplify speaking goals of asserting individuality, building community, and discovering knowledge or belief and often provide examples of a stream-of-consciousness organizational pattern and narrative as a form of support.

Instructors will not have difficulty finding models to illustrate the various options presented in the course. In fact, they might discover that some of their favorite "speeches," which never seemed appropriate to bring to class in traditional speaking courses, now can be used as models of public speaking.

Students' responses to the course have been overwhelmingly enthusiastic. They report enjoying the experience and learning a great deal about public speaking. Their speaking performances confirm for me the value of teaching public speaking in the fashion I've described. The presentations are consistently excellent, even in the first round of speeches. For whatever reason, the students seem to understand how to achieve their speaking goals using a variety of means and are able to demonstrate that knowledge effectively. There's an additional benefit to teaching public speaking in this manner: The course material fits with my experiences of public speaking. Because I believe, finally, in what I'm teaching the students, I am able to be a more authentic and integrated instructor and model for them.

Resources

The following resources provide particularly useful information on feminist and Afrocentric perspectives.

Afrocentric Perspectives

Asante, Molefi Kete. *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1987.

Asante, Molefi Kete. *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*. Buffalo, NY: Amulefi, 1980.

Asante, Molefi Kete, and Jerry K. Frye. *Contemporary Public Communication: Applications*. New York: Harper, 1977.

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Bauman, Richard. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Rowley, MA: Newbury, 1977.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism.* New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made.* New York: Pantheon, 1972.

Golden, James L., and Richard D. Rieke. *The Rhetoric of Black Americans*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1971.

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Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom.* New York: Oxford UP, 1977.

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Smith, Arthur L., ed. *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

Warren, Mervyn A. *Black Preaching: Truth and Soul.* Washington, DC: UP of America, 1977.

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Feminist Perspectives

Bate, Barbara, and Anita Taylor, eds. *Women Communicating: Studies of Women's Talk.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1988.

Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind.* New York: Basic, 1986.

Ecker, Gisela, ed. *Feminist Aesthetics*. Boston: Beacon, 1985.

Ferguson, Kathy E. *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1984.

Foss, Karen A., and Sonja K. Foss. *Women Speak: The Eloquence of Women's Lives*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1991.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

Gray, Elizabeth Dodson, ed. *Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience*. Wellesley, MA: Roundtable, 1988.

hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black.* Boston: South End, 1989.

Joseph, Gloria I., and Jill Lewis. *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives.* Boston: South End, 1981.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places.* New York: Grove, 1989.

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Jackson, Jesse. "The Rainbow Coalition." *Great Speeches for Criticism and Analysis.* Ed. Lloyd Rohler and Roger Cook. Greenwood, IN: Alistair, 1988. 101-10.

Keillor, Garrison. *News from Lake Wobegon: Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter* (Cassette Recordings). St. Paul: Minnesota Public Radio, 1983.

Keillor, Garrison. *Gospel Birds and Other Stories of Lake Wobegon* (Cassette Recordings). St. Paul: Minnesota Public Radio, 1985.

Keillor, Garrison. *More News from Lake Wobegon: Faith, Hope, Love, Humor* (Cassette Recordings). St. Paul: Minnesota Public Radio, 1989.

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