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'Wait — Something's Missing!': The Status of Ethics in Basic Public Speaking Texts

Abstract

The basic course is important to the welfare of the speech communication discipline. According to Seiler and McGugin (1989), the basic course is the mainstay of the discipline. Gibson, Hanna, and Leichty (1990) surveyed 423 institutions of higher education nationwide and found that at 92% of the schools' enrollment in the basic course was increasing or holding steady (this is up from the figure of 88% reported in 1985). In a survey of college graduates, Pearson, Nelson, and Sorenson (1981) found that 93% believed that the basic speech course should be required for all students. Because of its popularity and the perceived need for it, the basic course is important to the speech communication discipline. This importance mandates that we work to keep it a high-quality offering.

Public speaking educators have a responsibility to teach both the skills needed to present a good speech and also guidelines for moral use of those skills. Just as we would not teach a child how to shoot a gun without explaining when and why it should be used, we should not teach students a powerful skill like public speaking and not provide appropriate guidelines. Greenberg (1986) argued that if ethics are not taught in the basic public speaking course, the learning is incomplete.

Unfortunately, there exists evidence that ethics are not fully explored in basic speech textbooks (e.g., Arnett, 1988; Hess and Pearson, in press). Overlooking ethical considerations in speech classes could have severe consequences. Todd-Mancillas (1987) voiced this concern over omission of ethics in communication classes: "One of my greatest concerns is that we may well be helping an entire generation of students to presume the unimportance of asking fundamentally important questions about the rightness or wrongness of given communication strategies" (p. 12). And as Johnson (1970) noted, "it may be that the most 'immoral' person is not he [or she] who makes 'wrong' decisions, but he [or she] who consistently neglects to consider the moral implications of decisions he [or she] does make" (p. 60).

This study was conducted to assess the current ethical guidance in basic public speaking textbooks. It focused on textbooks since they are the printed material students use during the course. Public speaking textbooks were examined since the public speaking focus is the most common orientation toward the basic course (Gibson, Hanna, & Leichty, 1990). By carefully examining what we currently teach in regards to speech ethics and deciding what we want to teach, we can evaluate our current status and clearly identify both strengths and areas in need of improvement.

Disciplines

Ethics and Political Philosophy | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Other Communication | Speech and Rhetorical Studies

Comments

Permission documentation is on file.

"Wait--something's missing!":
The Status of Ethics in Basic Public Speaking Texts

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The basic course is important to the welfare of the speech communication discipline. According to Seiler and McGukin (1989), the basic course is the mainstay of the discipline. Gibson, Hanna, and Leichty (1990) surveyed 423 institutions of higher education nationwide and found that at 92% of the schools enrollment in the basic course was increasing or holding steady (this is up from the figure of 88% reported in 1985). In a survey of college graduates, Pearson, Nelson, and Sorenson (1981) found that 93% believed that the basic speech course should be required for all students. Because of its popularity and the perceived need for it, the basic course is important to the speech communication discipline. This importance mandates that we work to keep it a high quality offering.

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Review of Literature

During the mid-twentieth century many communication scholars assumed that information was value-free. They maintained that like the natural sciences, communication could be studied objectively; issues of value judgment were best omitted from the scientific study of communication. For them, eye contact was considered the aspect of delivery in which the speaker looked directly at the audience, and the activity had no inherent goodness or badness. In the 1970's and 1980's, however, the notion of value-neutrality in speech communication began to lose popularity. Many scholars concluded that any communicative activity has value implications. Eye contact can be used to elicit feedback, to intimidate, or to appease, but it cannot be used without *some* effect. Andersen (1979) observed, "ethical matters are part of the very substance of the rhetorical act itself" (p. 4).

If communication necessarily involves ethical issues then a case can be supported that speech teachers have a responsibility to teach communication ethics. That is, it is not moral to teach people how to use skills that might be unfairly employed at another's expense without pointing out limits of appropriate use. Jensen (1985) said that we should reject the opinion of a public relations specialist who claimed that ethical questions are best left for philosophers and clergy members. He suggested that "all of us, as students and teachers of communication, as everyday practitioners of communication, need to shoulder that responsibility" (p. 329).

A claim can be made that students should already have formed a code of ethics prior to entering college, so speech teachers need not teach ethics. Two responses refute this claim. First, the assumption that students will already have strong ethical values prior to entering college cannot be taken for granted. Recent happenings such as "scandals in the government, influence peddling, Pentagon waste, insider trading, exposes by whistleblowers, life and death issues in health care, raping of the environment, televangelist escapades, and media manipulations" (Jensen, 1991, p. xi) indicate that adolescents are not necessarily learning strong ethical values from society. Considering the high rate of broken families in present-day America (Brehm, 1992), they may not be learning sound ethics at home either. Furthermore, those students who did learn strong ethics at home may be living away from their families for the first time and may be questioning old values and developing moral systems of their own.

Second, even if students do have strong ethical systems, they may not be sufficient. Public speaking transactions may require ethical guidance specific to that particular type of situation. For example, many scholars maintain that presenting a speech without proper preparation is unethical (e.g., Hanna & Gibson, 1989; Samovar & Mills, 1989), but general societal ethics do not address this issue. So even if students enter basic speech classes with well-developed ethical ideals, they may need to learn more if they are to be ethical public speakers.

From the earliest roots of the discipline to the present, speech communication has a long history of interest in ethics (Haskins, 1989). Just in

the 70 year period from 1915 to 1985, speech communication journals printed 128 articles on ethics (Arnett, 1987). Some of this interest has been directed toward teaching ethics in the basic speech course. Jensen (1959) noted that during the 1950's increased attention was being paid to teaching ethics in basic speech courses, and Johnson (1970) found that 47 of 55 survey respondents believed teachers had a responsibility to teach ethics in basic speech. Johannesen (1980) and Jensen (1985) proposed some ideas for how to best teach ethics.

In spite of the discipline's attention to speech ethics, evidence indicates that we are not providing much guidance in basic public speaking courses. After surveying 552 colleges and universities nationwide, Gibson, Hanna, and Huddleston (1985) wrote,

Perhaps the more surprising finding is what is *not* ranked among the top ten topics in time spent in instruction. The absence of ethics and rhetorical criticism from the 'top ten' in [classes using] the public speaking orientation...provide[s] interesting, if not puzzling, questions about instructional priorities. (pp. 286-287)

Textbooks, particularly, seem to underplay the importance of ethics. Sikkink (1981) observed that even though there exists a professional commitment to teach ethics, textbooks have virtually no coverage of the topic. A review of basic course texts prompted Arnett (1988) to write "surprisingly there was a lack of communication ethics discussion beyond codes and ethos issues" (p. 33).

This study was undertaken to provide an accurate description of what current texts teach in regard to public speaking ethics. Two research questions were investigated.

RQ₁: How much attention do basic public speaking textbooks give to ethics?

RQ₂: What guidelines do basic public speaking textbooks provide for ethical use of communication?

Method

Sample

The first step of the analysis was to collect a sample of texts. Because this study focused on the treatment of ethics in basic public speaking texts, only public speaking books were investigated. Hybrids (books combining public speaking and interpersonal communication) were excluded from the population. Since textbook publishers do not release exact sales figures, surveys were used to determine which texts are used most. Recent surveys by Gibson, Hanna, and Huddleston (1985), Gibson, Hanna, and Leichty (1990), and Pelias (1989) produced a list of 11 texts that are most popular. Then, another 13 texts were added to the sample based on availability, so that it included as many texts as possible.

Procedure

The books were studied by content analysis. Budd, Thorpe, and Donohew (1967) observed that "because every research project is unique, the analyst must adapt, revise, or combine techniques to fit his [or her] individual problems" (p. ix).

The analysis in this study was based on the works of Holsti (1969), Krippendorff (1980), and Stempel (1989).

Investigation followed a three-step process. First, a unit of analysis was chosen. Since research question two asked what topics (regarding ethics) were included in basic speech texts, the topic was chosen as the unit of analysis. Second, categories were constructed. In order to avoid imposing a priori assumptions on the data, grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed. Grounded theory is a method of research based on constant comparison. The essence of grounded theory is that the researcher takes the first text and breaks it down into as many categories as possible (based on topics in this case), then examines the categories to be sure they are representative of the data. If so, the second text is coded according to the scheme just created. If an item does not fit into any existing category, a new category is created. If the initial categories do not work for a portion of the second text, the two texts are examined together and categories are created that are representative of both. When this process is complete, the remaining texts are done in like manner, until all have been coded. By the end of the study, the categories should be representative of all the data, and false assumptions by the researchers should have been abandoned (since they would not fit all the data). As the coding progresses, underlying uniformities begin to emerge, and these incidents are grouped into larger categories. All decisions in grounded theory must be made based on the explicit content of the texts--the researcher may not interpret the material in any way.

Several decisions were made during the coding that affected the outcome of the research. These decisions are important for the reader to be aware of, so that the results can be more meaningfully understood. First, only the content that explicitly mentioned ethics was coded. Material that suggested appropriate uses of the skills learned in speech class but did not label it as an ethical issue was not coded. For example, some texts discussed the importance of developing a trustworthy reputation with the audience, but did not mention that it was an ethical issue. Since grounded theory states that the researcher cannot make assumptions about the data, this material was not coded. There is no guarantee that the author intended this issue to be an ethical matter (and there is also no guarantee that students will interpret the discussion as one that involves moral issues). Second, only the body of each text was coded. Since authors presumably put information that they consider crucial in the text and reserve for the appendix information that they consider optional, appendectomies were performed on the texts. Prefaces were also excluded for the same reason.

The third step of the analysis involved tabulating the quantity of text devoted to ethics in public speaking. Words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages are commonly-used units; since basic speech texts use a standardized text and print size, the pages was an accurate measure of text devoted to ethics. Only space devoted to writing was counted; figures and pictures that were placed in the ethics section were not tabulated.

Results

The sample was collected as specified. Texts analyzed are listed in the first section of the reference list. Surveys revealed that the texts by Ayres and Miller (1990), Bradley (1991), DeVito (1990), Gronbeck, McKerrow, Ehninger, and Monroe (1990), Hanna and Gibson (1989), Hunt (1987), Lucas (1989), Nelson and Pearson (1990), Osborn and Osborn (1991), Samovar and Mills (1989), and Verderber (1991) were most used throughout the country. They composed the purposive part of the sample, and the remaining texts were based on availability.

Coding was conducted as described in the method section. Reliability was calculated as recommended by Stempel (1989) for research in which only one coder is employed. One textbook coded early in the research was recoded after coding was completed and mistakes were counted. Mistakes included failure to recognize an item, coding an item that was not relevant, and coding an item into the wrong category. Reliability of this study was .95, suggesting that if the same coder conducted the study again the results would be virtually identical.

Research Question One

The first research question asked "How much attention do basic public speaking textbooks give to ethics?" The result matches Arnett's (1988) question "where have all the ethics gone?" (p. 23). The average allotment for ethics was merely 2 pages per text, and three of the books did not mention ethics at all. Only one text devoted an entire chapter to ethics, and that chapter had only six and a quarter pages of text. Another text included a chapter with ethics in the title, but only two and a half pages of this chapter discussed ethics. One third of the sample devoted a single page or less to discussing ethical uses of the skills taught in the book.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked "What guidelines do basic public speaking textbooks provide for ethical use of communication?" The results of the research suggest the question could best be answered, "various and sundry." Each text had miscellaneous suggestions, and there was very little overlap among texts. The object of the content analysis was to produce an outline of guidelines common to a majority of texts. What emerged was this outline of topics common to at least half the texts that mentioned ethics:

- I. Importance of ethics in public speaking
- II. Discussion of what is ethical (in general)
 - A. Suggested standards for making ethical decisions
- III. How to practice good ethics
 - A. Use ethical methods
 1. Prepare the speech well
 - a. Know the material well--be thoroughly informed
 2. Be honest and clear in your presentation of the material
 - a. Be honest--don't lie to the audience

In short, many texts provided rationale for the importance of ethics, gave some standard(s) for making ethical judgments (of the 18 different standards provided, no single standard was mentioned in more than a fifth of the texts, though), and provided miscellaneous suggestions for ethical methods in preparation and presentation.

The high level of variance among texts' suggestions was best exemplified by the guidelines for using ethical methods. Only two guidelines--be informed and don't lie--were mentioned in at least half the texts, while 77 different suggestions were mentioned in just one or two texts. As can be seen from the outline (only two specific suggestions appear on it--the rest is topic headings), even when a majority of the texts wrote about one topic the specific content varied widely. In another example, sixteen texts discussed the importance of ethics, but of the 23 reasons mentioned by the texts only three were mentioned by more than two books.

Discussion

This study provided a look at what information about speech ethics students and instructors can expect to find--or not find--in basic texts. Two conclusions are immediately evident. First, the material is limited. People looking for ethical guidance in public speaking will have to look elsewhere for ideas. Textbooks' discussion of ethics can best be called "token attention." That is, enough material is included to warrant the claim that ethics are mentioned, but not enough material is included to really do much good for those wondering how to appropriately use their new skill.

Second, there exists no clear agreement among the writers of textbooks what guidelines should be taught. No party is clearly responsible for the lack of agreement of what is important to teach. Textbook authors write what publishers will print, and publishers print what educators want to use. Since educators do not demand clear ethical guidelines in texts, critics might be tempted to hold them responsible. However, the problem may be better attributed to the prevailing philosophy of the social sciences. Ever since Max Weber wrote that social sciences should be value-neutral, scholars and researchers have tried to simply study the facts without making value judgments (Root, 1992). In effort to produce value-free scholarship, texts have been written that are devoid of value statements (unfortunately, the removal of explicit value statements does not make a text value-free--it just means that the values are not stated). Since the standard has been to produce texts without value statements, scholars have never had to decide what values need to be in a basic text.

One option for including ethical guidance in basic speech texts would be to create a set of suggested topics that should be covered in discussion of ethics in basic speech. For example, Johannesen (1980) generated a code of ethics for discourse which consisted of 11 guidelines. Certainly any guidelines that are generated do not need to be conclusive--it is doubtful that people will ever completely agree on what is ethical and what is not. But, they should provide students with both some ideas to consider when speaking in public, and they

should provide some means of finding their own answers (and making those answers good ones).

A great difficulty with determining what should be taught is that there presently exists no consensus on many important questions. Three of the most important questions raised by this study are presented as follows.

1. *What kind of message do we want to send to students?* In addition to the topics included in a book, simply the pages devoted to a topic and location within the text send a message to students about perceived importance of material. One text wrote, "The ethics of persuasion is of considerable concern today. The power of our message hopefully will be conveyed in the brevity of our comment...."¹ The power of the message is indeed conveyed by the brevity of the comment, but the message sent by this text which devoted only a single paragraph to speech ethics is that the topic is unimportant. Although this study did not investigate the location of the ethics discussion in the text, the book that began with a discussion of ethics on the second page was more likely to send a message that ethics matters. Thus, even if scholars and writers have difficulties deciding exactly what students need to learn, the fact that ethics are seriously discussed sends an important message.

2. *In how much detail should ethics be presented?* A difficulty with teaching ethics is that there exists no agreement of what is ethical. Since teachers cannot prescribe sets of behaviors or universally accepted guidelines, they must present a number of possibilities and provide some critical thinking skills to help students evaluate options and make wise choices. However, this topic is too broad to simply be included as one aspect of a speech class. Indeed, for some people it is the subject of an entire graduate program. The question arises then, where do educators draw the line for what is appropriate to teach in public speaking? A balance must be reached so that students learn enough about speech ethics that they can make intelligent choices, and yet not spend so much time studying ethics that they do not learn the skills and theories that they need to learn in a public speaking class.

3. *Does discussion of speech ethics need to be explicit?* This study only examined material that explicitly mentioned ethics. However, the argument could be forwarded that to effectively integrate ethical guidelines into the text moral issues should be mentioned as information is presented, and it does not need to be specifically called ethics. An author might simply say when discussing speech composition that it is inappropriate to omit information which is clearly relevant, but contrary, to the case being made. Does the writer need to use the words "moral" or "ethical" in the discussion? Possibly so: unless writers tell students that certain actions or intentions are unethical, the message might be interpreted differently (especially by those who would like to hear a different message). But like the other questions, providing answers goes beyond the scope of this study.

The results of this project lead to several suggestions for future research and discussion. Scholars and educators may wish to draw some tentative conclusions about what needs to be taught in the basic speech course (perhaps the

Commission on Communication Ethics and the Basic Course Committee could team up on a call for papers at an upcoming SCA convention?). Until we know what we want to teach, we will likely flounder without direction. The old adage that "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" can be restated "when you don't take any step, no matter where you're headed you won't get there." If we do not take some direction, students will not learn about communication ethics.

Interestingly, post hoc analysis indicated that of the guidelines for ethical actions in speechmaking, over two thirds were prohibitions. That is, the vast majority of ethical guidelines read "don't do this, don't do that." The drawback to this presentation of ethics was noted by Shames (1989) who wrote,

As long as ethics is thought of as a hodgepodge of precepts parochially applied in isolated instances, it tends to be perceived as a dreary list of prohibitions.... But that is a dumb way of looking at ethics--dumb because it is removed from context. Looking at ethics that way is like complaining that in baseball you have to hit between the foul lines; if you didn't have to, your range of options on any given pitch would be wider, that's true--but there would be no ballgame. Ethics is what defines the playing field and makes the game possible, and, taken whole, it is therefore the most affirmative thing in the world. (p. 207)

Writers and educators would be wise to conceptualize ethics as affirmative parameters rather than prohibitions. Metaphorically, this would mean making ethics the soil and rain that give the tree life, rather than the pruning shears that trim branches. For some, this would be a different way to view ethics, and perhaps a productive one.

As indicated previously, interest in ethics has increased since the mid-1980's. This research suggests that to date, little of that increased interest has influenced basic public speaking textbooks. However, there is evidence of change. For example, one text included in this study and currently under revision will feature substantially expanded discussion of ethics in the next edition. If the academic process works properly, textbooks should change to match prevailing scholarly opinion; the result should be a greater role of ethics in textbooks of the future, paralleling the increasing awareness of the importance of teaching appropriate ways to use skills learned in class.

Note

1. The citation of this text is withheld as the intention of this article is *not* to point fingers. Additionally, while this comment is used as a negative example, the author(s) is/are not allowed a chance to respond to the constructive criticisms; this provides further reason not to disclose the source of the quote.

Textbooks Studied

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