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Basic Public Speaking Principles: Examination of Twelve Popular Texts

**Jon A. Hess
Judy C. Pearson**

The basic course is the mainstay of the discipline (Seiler & McGugin, 1989). For most students it is the first contact with the speech communication discipline, and for many, the only. Pearson and Nelson (1990) noted that "our [speech communication discipline's] identity... seems inextricably tied to it. Many people including colleagues from other disciplines think that the basic course *is* our field" (p. 4). Since its impact cannot be discounted, scholars must continue to assess both its content and form.

The importance of the basic course is reflected in the number of published articles focused on it. Aside from having an annually published journal (*The Basic Communication Course Annual*) devoted to it, articles concerning the basic course are sprinkled throughout many of the discipline's journals. However, Schneider (1991) pointed out that few studies have focused on the textbooks used. Since the textbook is generally the foundation upon which the course is built, it is an important object of study.

Although the term basic course may be used to identify a variety of courses (such as public speaking, interpersonal communication, hybrid blends of the public and interpersonal communication, or communication theory), public speaking is the most common approach (Gray, 1989; Trank & Lewis, 1991). Thus, this investigation focused on public speaking texts. The objective was to gain a clear understanding of what

content is included in basic speech textbooks. This task involved examining principles in texts and finding how much book space was devoted to each principle.

This information should be valuable for instructors who teach public speaking, for administrators who supervise the course, and for writers of textbooks and accompanying materials. But most of all, this information should be of use to scholars and critics of the basic course. By examining exactly what we include in our texts, we can then evaluate the merit of each component. Through carefully examining our own practices, we can assess our basic public speaking course to improve the weaknesses and maintain the strengths.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Public Speaking Special Theory

Theories can be classified into at least two categories: general theories and special theories (Bormann, 1980). General theories are theories that describe the way something must happen. For example, the theory of gravity states that objects will fall toward the center of the Earth; the object has no choice. Special theories, however, describe an ideal way for something to happen. Robert's rules of order are a special theory for how to conduct a group meeting. While participants are able to violate the rules, Robert's rules propose an effective way to operate.

The basic public speaking course presents a special theory, one we can call public speaking theory. It describes a way for a speaker to communicate effectively with an audience. However, the speaker has a choice: she or he can choose to ignore virtually any aspect of the special theory. A speaker could present a speech without organizing it into an introduction, body, or conclusion, could opt to neither preview the

main points nor speak loudly enough to be heard. However, if the special theory is accurate, these violations from the guidelines would detract from the effectiveness of the presentation.

Historical Background and Critique of Public Speaking Special Theory

While concern with public speaking can be traced at least as far back as 300 B.C. to Aristotle's *The Rhetoric*, the roots of the modern course begin in the mid-1800s (Macke, 1991). Throughout the 19th century, public speaking was taught only in the English department as a rhetoric class (Oliver, 1962). However, aided by the progressive movement and popularity of pragmatic philosophy (characterized by Dewey's work) in the early 1900s, communication studies grew in importance to scholars and practitioners (Bormann, 1990). The first modern speech textbook was published in 1905 (Frizzell, 1905), and when the National Association for the Academic Study of Public Speaking was formed in 1914, the modern basic course was born.

Since its beginnings in early 1900's, the modern public speaking course has changed very little. Early writings confirm that the special theory that educators teach today's students is strikingly similar to what it was 80 years ago. Prior to 1920, students gave seven or eight extemporaneous speeches during the course (Trueblood, 1915). They learned both theory and practice, with an emphasis on practice (Houghton, 1918). The focus included audience adaptation, speaking loudly enough, and several topics fitting into the rubric or speech organization (Kay, 1917). Students studied both verbal and nonverbal aspects of delivery (Duffy, 1917), and the aims of the basic course included promoting better speaking habits, practicing speaking, overcoming stagefright, perfecting delivery, advancing thinking, and improving organization (Hollister, 1917). The contemporary course largely

reflects these concerns (Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1985; Hargis, 1956; Trank & Lewis, 1991).

Over the last 40 years, regular surveys of American colleges and universities have monitored the nature of the basic course (Dedmond & Frandsen, 1964; Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970; Gibson, Gruner, Hanna, Smythe, & Hayes, 1980; Gibson, Hanna, & Huddleston, 1985; Gibson, Hanna, & Leichty, 1991; Gibson, Kline, & Gruner, 1974; Hargis, 1956; Jones, 1954; London, 1964; Trank & Lewis, 1991). These surveys revealed few changes. Hargis (1956) found that the main foci of the basic speech course were speech composition, speech delivery, audience analysis, voice, and diction. Almost thirty years later Gibson, Hanna, and Huddleston (1985) found similar results: outlining, delivery, and audience analysis were three of the six concepts allocated the most class time.

The basic public speaking course has changed so little in the past 80 years because public speaking special theory has weathered the test of time well. Special theories that are not robust do not prevail over time; this special theory is certainly well-constructed and very useful. However, the literature does reveal criticisms of both public speaking theory and the basic speech course. For example, one long-lived debate involves ethics, a topic which is not given much emphasis in the course. Williamson (1939) and Andersen (1979) identified ethics as a necessary topic in the basic speech course, and Greenburg (1986) pointed out that the topic is still virtually ignored in the class.

A more recent criticism is that the basic course does not teach work-related skills. Hanna (1978) found this to be a particular criticism in the business world. Johnson and Szczupakiewicz (1987) reported similar results. Whereas alumni listed informative skills, listening, and handling questions as the most important communication skills at work, faculty endorsed outlining, topic selection, and entertaining speaking as the most important areas of instruction.

Textbooks and the Basic Public Speaking Course

The first textbook was printed in America in 1650, and by the mid-twentieth century more than 2,500,000,000 textbooks were being printed worldwide (Benthul, 1978). By then, textbooks had become the core of classes, and such a wide variety of texts were available that the number was almost unmanageable. Textbooks have become a dominant aspect of American education. Benthul wrote: "The textbook is the most available, the most relied upon, and the most common material used in the classrooms of America" (p. 5).

A high quality textbook is an important component of an effective first course in speech communication. Teague (1961) noted that the textbook provides a common core around which to build a syllabus. Furthermore, it helps conserve precious class time by making available an explanation of principles and of procedures that need not be discussed at length during class period (p. 469). Although teachers are free to deviate from the material included in the texts, textbooks provide a good overview of the basic concepts students will be exposed to during the course.

Some scholars have suggested that some information in speech textbooks leaves room for improvement. Pelias (1989) noted that public speaking texts' treatment of communication apprehension was — while not incorrect — inadequate. Allen and Preiss (1990) found that many persuasion texts contained incorrect information, and others were incomplete in their coverage of the material. For example, of the texts they studied that mentioned fear appeals, six had information that agreed with a meta-analysis of existing research, four had conclusions that were vague or unclear, and fifteen had conclusions that were inconsistent with the meta-analysis.

Speech organization is taught in most basic courses. However, there is little research backing the information presented in the texts. Pearson and Nelson (1990) noted that

Monroe's motivated sequence appears in most popular texts, even though it has "never been shown to be a more effective organizational pattern than other methods of arranging a public speech" (p. 6). Logue (1988) reviewed research concerning the effectiveness of using a preview statement and found that "the rationale and empirical support for it are not well grounded" (p.7).

Future of the Basic Public Speaking Course

Special theories are specific to time and culture; that is, a special theory is meant to apply to a particular context (Bormann, 1980). As the American culture changes with time, the special theory may need adaptation to keep abreast of the times. Gray (1989) wrote, the basic course "needs to be kept current with societal needs and expectations" (p. 3). Thus, in addition to needing modification due to error in the theory, scholars may also need to update special theory because of changing times. However, careless meddling with a proven formula is almost certain to reduce its quality, and public speaking special theory has repeatedly demonstrated high quality. For educators to keep the basic speech course at its maximum potential, careful study is necessary.

Several publications in recent years have suggested that some changes may be warranted for the basic course (e.g., Gray, 1989; Pearson & Nelson, 1990; Trank, 1983). This investigation was intended to take a close look at exactly what is contained in the texts--to adhere to the old adage "look before you leap." The purpose was to study the principles of public speaking as presented in current textbooks. Two research questions were investigated:

- RQ1:** What are the principles of public speaking included in current basic public speaking textbooks?
- RQ2:** How much space is allotted to each principle in basic public speaking texts?

METHOD

Sample

Since this study examined the principles of public speaking, the population was the set of all introductory-level college public speaking texts currently in use. This definition excludes those texts that are hybrids containing both public speaking and interpersonal communication, as well as other public speaking books such as persuasion, debate, or argumentation texts.

The purposive sample was intended to represent the most popular public speaking texts. There exists no comprehensive list of the top-selling textbooks, so the list had to be gleaned from available surveys. Although this method probably does not give a completely accurate picture of textbook popularity, the top several texts were evident from surveys, and a number of others were clearly also popular. A sample of 12 texts was chosen that was definitely representative of a large share of the market and is indicative of the nature of basic public speaking texts.

Textbook popularity was rated by Gibson, Hanna, and Huddleston (1985); Gibson, Hanna, & Leichty (1990); and Pelias (1989). Pelias's survey revealed 12 popular texts, and Gibson et al. (1985, 1990) reported seven of the most popular. The sample chosen (alphabetically listed) included Ayres and Miller's (1990) *Effective Public Speaking* (3rd ed.), Bradley's (1988) *Fundamentals of Speech Communication. The Credibility of Ideas* (5th ed.), DeVito's (1990) *The Elements of Public Speaking* (4th ed.), Ehninger. Gronbeck, McKerrow, and Monroe's (1986) *Principles of Speech Communication* (10th ed.), Hanna and Gibson's (1989) *Public Speaking for Personal Success* (2nd ed.), Hunt's (1987) *Public Speaking* (2nd ed.), Lucas's (1989) *The Art of Public Speaking* (3rd ed.), McCroskey's (1986) *An Introduction to Rhetorical Communi-*

cation (5th ed.). Nelson and Pearson's (1990) *Confidence in Public Speaking* (4th ed.), Osborn and Osborn's (1991) *Public Speaking* (2nd ed.); Samovar and Mills's (1989) *Oral Communication: Message and Response* (7th ed.), and Verderber's (1991) *The Challenge of Effective Public Speaking* (8th ed.).

Procedures

Content analysis was used to examine these 12 texts. There exists no single correct method for content analysis; rather the researcher must be tailored to each study. Budd, Thorpe, and Donohew (1967) noted "Because each research project is unique, the analyst must adapt, revise, or combine techniques to fit his [or her] individual problems" (p. ix). The method used in this study was adapted from the works of Budd et al. (1967), Holsti (1969), and Stempel (1989).

The research followed a three-step process. First, the unit of analysis was selected. Second, the categories were constructed, and finally, the data were coded and weighted. Since this study was conducted to flesh out the principles of public speaking, the topic was chosen as the unit of analysis. Weighting is typically operationalized by counting the number of words, sentences, paragraphs, or pages devoted to a topic (Holsti, 1969). Since most basic public speaking textbooks use the same size of page and same size type, the page was used as the unit for weighting.

The construction of categories was an important concern, since one of the objectives of the study was to determine the basic principles. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was adopted to avoid imposing assumptions on the data. Once the categories were delineated (see Table 1), the items were weighted to address the second research question. Topics were rank-ordered according to units of analysis, by averaging the number of pages written about each.

RESULTS

The analysis was conducted as described. Employment of grounded theory required that the researcher code the first text into as many categories as possible, then check to see if the categories were representative of the data. Then the second text was coded: information was coded into existing categories, or when none existed, new categories were created. If the initial categories did not work for the second text, the two were examined together and the categories modified to work for both. Ultimately, through this process of constant comparison, all the texts were coded. As the research progressed, underlying uniformities began to emerge. These incidents were grouped into larger categories. Outlines of the resulting principles were composed, quantity was recorded, and reliability determined.

Reliability was calculated in the manner recommended by Stempel (1989). The researcher (the first author) recoded one of the early textbooks in entirety. The results of the recoding were compared with the master list and the number correct was divided by the total. Mistakes involved failure to recognize an item, coding an item that was not relevant, and coding an item into the wrong category. This method yielded a reliability of .97.

Only face validity could be achieved for this study. To determine it, the results were compared with the contents of the public speaking half of some hybrid (public speaking and interpersonal communication) texts. Almost all of the topics appeared in these texts, and they comprehensively covered the main points. Texts used for comparison were Brooks and Heath's (1989) *Speech Communication* (6th ed.) and Adler and Rodman's (1991) *Understanding Human Communication* (4th ed.).

Table 1
Topics in Public Speaking Textbooks
Rank-ordered by Space Allotted

Topic	Mean Number of Pages
Persuasive Speaking	27.2
Language	20.9
Informative Speaking	19.5
Audience	18.0
Getting Information	14.9
Presentational Aids	14.7
Listening	14.1
Reasoning	13.6
Organization	13.0
Vocal and Nonverbal Aspects	13.0
Speaking on Special Occasions	12.9
Support Material	12.1
Outlining	9.8
Introduction	9.2
The Speaker	9.2
Selecting a Topic	6.6
Anxiety	5.5
Message Theory	5.5
Conclusion	5.3
Modes of Delivery	4.6
Determining Purpose	3.6
Thesis Sentence and Main Points	3.6
Ethics	3.3
Practice	1.5

Research question one asked "What are the basic principles of public speaking?" This question was answered by

coding the bodies of the texts. Presumably, authors included all of the information that they consider essential in the body of the text, reserving the appendix for material they consider either optional or of lesser importance. Thus, appendices were not coded. The results of coding appear on Table 1.

Table 2
Supracategories of Public Speaking Topics
Rank-ordered by Space Allotted

Topic	Mean Number of Pages
Speech Preparation	97.6
Taxonomy of Public Speaking	59.6
Activities and Elements	54.9
Speech Delivery	45.0
Message Theory	5.5

The 24 principles could be grouped into five overall categories: message theory, speech preparation, speech delivery, activities and elements in public speaking, and a taxonomy of public speaking. Message theory explained a model of the communication transaction: sender, receiver, message, noise, and feedback. Speech preparation included discussion of: a) procedural steps for preparing a speech: topic and purpose selection, getting material, organization, and outlining, and b) discussion of structural components of a speech: the introduction, body, conclusion, and presentational aids. Speech delivery discussed performance anxiety, language, modes of delivery (extemporaneous, improptu, etc.), and vocal and non-verbal aspects of delivery. Activities and elements included listening, reasoning, the speaker (primarily information about

source credibility), audience analysis, and discussion of the components of the communication process (sender, receiver, message, feedback, etc.). Finally, taxonomy of public speaking contained information specific to informative speeches, persuasive speeches, and special occasions (namely, introducing a speaker).

To provide a better understanding of the composition of the texts, the number of pages allotted to each topic was calculated. This procedure addressed RQ2, concerning how much space is allotted to each principle in basic public speaking texts. The results listed in Table 1, are the mean number of pages per topic. Persuasive speaking, language, and informative speaking were allocated the greatest amount of text space, while the thesis sentence and main points, ethics, and practice received the least text space.

DISCUSSION

Trank (1983) suggested that textbook authors are under pressure from publishers to keep their books in conformity with competing texts. The results of this study lend support to this claim. Content analysis revealed that although each text was easily categorized into the 24 topics found in Table 1, the specific information about the topics was often different. This finding suggests that even though writers may not always be in agreement about the facts, pressure to standardize may keep them writing about the same concepts. Thus, although the study was intended to flesh out principles, it produced an outline of topics with each text taking its own unique position about each one.

This study provides a good overview of the composition of basic public speaking textbooks. Speech preparation is allotted the most space, and message theory is allowed the least. The rest of the pages are distributed roughly equally among: a taxonomy of speaking situations, activities and elements in the public speaking arena, and speech delivery. If

the number of pages devoted to a given topic is correlated with the perceived importance of the topic, these findings would suggest that textbooks are most concerned with helping students prepare good speeches. Additionally, providing knowledge of relevant variables and delivery techniques is also important.

Table 1 illustrates that the basic public speaking course synthesizes information from a vast diversity of disciplines for use in a unified product. For example, production of an effective speech requires that a student do the following. First, she or he must begin by selecting a topic and purpose (English composition). Then the topic must be thoroughly researched involving library research and interviewing experts (components of getting information)--aspects of library science and journalism. Included in the case will probably be reasoning (logic and argumentation), and the whole argument must be prepared and presented ethically (ethics, philosophy, and theology). Since presentational aids are vital to learning, applying principles of art and design will prove beneficial to communicating effectively via the visual channel. So, in many ways the basic speech course can be considered a capstone to the fundamental curricula: the course in which students must synthesize and apply their knowledge.

Post hoc analysis revealed that the specific topics from Table 1 could be clustered into four groups. These groups represent logical groupings of the specific topics listed in Table 1 based on the depth of treatment each received (do not confuse these *depth of treatment* clusters with the *topical* clusters discussed previously). Persuasive speaking, language, informative speaking, and the audience were the primary foci of the textbooks. These topics were thoroughly discussed and relevant issues were explicated. The second group consisted of getting information, presentational aids, listening, reasoning, organization, vocal and nonverbal aspects, speaking on special occasions, and support material. These topics, while allocated substantially less space than those in group one, were still

well-developed and treated as important building blocks in developing good speech skills.

The third group included outlining, the introduction, the speaker, selecting a topic, anxiety, message theory of communication, the conclusion, and modes of delivery. Discussion of these topics included a brief overview of the important information, but little exploration of complexities. The final group — determining purpose, thesis sentence, ethics, and practice — was composed of topics that were mentioned, but not reported in depth. Key ideas were mentioned, but little discussion accompanied the points.

The findings of this study are not an indictment of the basic speech class.

Like any human creation, the basic public speaking course is not perfect. This investigation a current overview of the most-used textbooks for the course that has become the mainstay of the discipline.

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