The Use of Role Models in Teaching Public Speaking

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The Use of Role Models in Teaching Public Speaking

Lauren A. Vicker

INTRODUCTION

The use of role models in teaching is a topic which has been examined extensively in education, psychology and sociology. For speech communication instructors, our basic understanding of how we learn from others must be extrapolated from other disciplines. This educational strategy is especially utilized in public speaking instruction, where students are routinely required to analyze the speeches of others, with the expectation that these exercises will help them in their own speech-making.

As a relatively new discipline in the social sciences, speech communication is still in a process of theory-building on its own. The discipline's base is borrowed from many fields in social science, business and the humanities. While we have examined many human communication phenomena in our own research studies, we still have great gaps. Gustav Friedrich has maintained that we need more original research and seminal work defining the basic characteristics of our discipline (1985). In an earlier work, Friedrich had specified the use of role models in the teaching of public speaking as an important question for research (1983).

This author's particular interest in the topic, however, had been brewing for some time before this. As a member of a Speech Communication Department which hosts a major
forensics tournament each year, it appeared that our under­
graders who volunteered to serve as time-keepers during
the tournament did a better job on their classroom speeches
than those who did not attend the competition. While it may
be argued that the better students might volunteer for such
an assignment, and thus give better speeches anyway, this
did not appear to hold true in the majority of cases.

Thus, this study was an outgrowth of personal experience
and its resulting curiosity, and is also a response to a call for
such research by scholars in the field.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship
between the use of role models and the teaching of public
speaking. Most public speaking teachers offer students
examples of public speaking for review and analysis. These
samples may take the forms of videotapes of famous speakers,
such as John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, or re­
quiring students to attend speeches on their campuses or in
their communities, or it may simply be a critical review of
fellow students' speeches within the speech class. But what­
ever the form, the underlying assumption is that such oppor­
tunities will ultimately help the student to prepare and pre­
sent a better speech than he or she might have done without
the experience of observing others.

The research question for this study is as follows:

Does the observation of role models in public speaking
allow a student to prepare and present a better speech than
he might have been able to give without the role models?

Since public speaking instructors have assumed this to be
the case, we will advance the following hypothesis:

Students who observe role models in public speaking
will present a better speech than students who have not ob­
served the role models.
**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

It is surprising that no studies have been done on the use of role models in teaching public speaking. Colleagues in the discipline seemed sure that someone must have looked at this topic; and yet, several separate searches of the literature failed to locate even one study which examined this question.

Friedrich (1983) has done a credible job relating the work of A. Bandura and others who pioneered our understanding of the use of role models in a variety of educational settings, to the arena of public speaking. His review includes studies which examined the use of role models in treating speech anxiety. Friedrich goes on to lament the lack of research base which leaves us unable to answer questions about the effectiveness of using role models as a skill development strategy in public speaking classes.

The single study on the use of model speeches in the basic speech course (Matlon, 1968) is a survey drawn from doctoral dissertation research done 25 years ago. Matlon found that 62% of the responding speech teachers did use models for instruction in the basic course. Respondents indicated that they used models primarily "to illustrate principles of public speaking, to demonstrate speaking of noteworthy individuals, to add to one's knowledge of the humanities, and because the models appeared in the textbook" (p. 51). Matlon's study, however, was primarily a data gathering mechanism, and not an analysis of the effectiveness of role models as an instructional strategy.

Since Bandura's seminal work, research into the use of role models in other social science disciplines has proceeded at a consistent pace. Many of the studies have centered around life role models of teachers and counselors for elementary and high school students. Fewer studies have involved college students. These include studies of college professors as role
models and motivators for their students (Stake and Noonan, 1985; Erkut and Mokros, 1984). A single study was found related to communication performance. Barth and Gambrill (1984) studied social work students who had the opportunity to observe role models conduct interviews with clients, and then were given feedback on their own interviewing skills. Results of the study suggested this was a worthwhile experience and more opportunities of a similar nature needed to be made available to students.

While role models have not been systematically observed in the speech communication classroom, the literature suggests that their use might be beneficial for students. Our current practice of using role models without empirical evidence of their effectiveness, however, should be questioned.

PROCEDURES

The subjects in this study were students in two introductory speech communication classes at a small liberal arts college located in New York. The classes were offered consecutively, during the day, and seemed to draw a relatively homogeneous group of students (i.e., the students were of similar age, there were a few minorities in each class, and there were no non-traditional students). Instructor effect was controlled by having the same instructor for both classes. Course content was carefully planned and presented to ensure that both groups received essentially the same instruction.

This speech communication course was a hybrid design, with public speaking as its final component. For the experimental effect, a single day in the semester was chosen. The experimental group viewed a videotape of students making informative speeches. The instructor was not present and no one gave additional instruction or comments. The control group class did not meet that day, but was given the day for "speech research". They were told that the instructor would be
available for any questions during class time, but no students took advantage of this opportunity.

The videotape that was observed by the experimental group was a tape of seven informative speeches given by upper division public speaking students. The group was from an evening class held during the previous semester, and most of the students were part-time and had little contact with the day students in the research groups. Several other instructors were asked to view the tape before it was shown to the experimental group, and they concurred that the public speaking ability of the students represented a wide range.

The following week, the students in the control and experimental groups gave their own classroom speeches. These speeches were videotaped and retained for evaluation. After all the speeches had been completed, a total of 12 speeches were videotaped and used from each class.

The evaluations of the speeches were done by a group of 12 senior-level speech students at a different small liberal arts college in New York. The students watched the tapes as a group and rated each speech on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 representing the best speech overall and one representing the weakest.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The data obtained from student raters were converted to a mean for each of the 12 speakers in each group. These means were analyzed using a two-sample t-test. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 1.

It is interesting to note that the differences between the two groups are not in the direction hypothesized: the control group actually did somewhat better on their speeches than the experimental group. The differences between the groups are significant at the .05 level, but not at the .01 level. Thus, we can conclude that the hypothesis was not supported.
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Table 1
Analysis of Means for the Effect of Role Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
<th>SE Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Group</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ T = 2.64 \]
\[ P = 0.015 \]

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study did not support the hypothesis that watching role models improved a student's ability to prepare and present a classroom speech. This directly contradicts conventional thought and common practice of public speaking instructors, who routinely include the analysis of speeches as part of the instructional process. There are several possible explanations for the findings of this study.

One possibility is that there were some extraneous factors which influenced the results. Even though course content and instructor effect were carefully controlled, the classroom dynamics can often produce differences in course content. The initiative of individual students to seek out further information and other public speaking experiences, or the ability to capitalize on past experience (such as a high school course or a club office which requires much public speaking experience) may also produce students who give more effective speeches. Students in the control group may have indeed used the "Speech Research Day" to do research for their speeches, and thus improve performance. Thus, we can never perfectly control the factors involved.

A second explanation for the findings of this study is that the group doing the ratings of the speeches were influenced by the speech content, the group setting for the evaluation, or the...
forced compliance involved in this task. While their instructor reported that they were willing to participate, many factors may have affected the reliability and validity of their ratings. In examining the raw scores, it is interesting to note that the students were quite consistent in their ratings: the range used on the 10-point scale was generally not more than four points.

A final but significant explanation for the findings is that the instructor's role in public speaking instruction may have been underestimated. It may indeed be true that watching speeches helps a student to learn, but only when this viewing is accompanied by critical class analysis led by the instructor. Without the "expert" teacher available to comment and point out significant factors which affect performance, the novice student may be unable on his own to truly learn and internalize lessons from the role model. Thus, the comments of the instructor may be a crucial factor in helping a student sort through preparation and performance options available in public speaking.

Clearly, this study was a pilot study, an attempt to begin an investigation into an area speech teachers take for granted, but have never truly tested. The logistics involved in conducting such a study make it difficult and time-consuming, but the results of this study should encourage others to work to better define the answers to questions so basic to our teaching. Such definition will benefit our students and enhance the status of the discipline as we attempt to build a theoretical base of our own.

**REFERENCES**

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