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The Introductory Communication Course: The Public Speaking Approach

Rudolph F. Verderber

Although a communication department has several choices for the focus of its introductory course, the public speaking approach continues to be the most prevalent largely because of its perceived value. People need public speaking skills because of their importance in achieving success in so many walks of life. In fact, in such professions as teaching, politics, law, sales, marketing, and the like, public speaking skills are fundamental to the job description. In addition, public speaking skills are useful to people in their daily impromptu speaking efforts as well. For instance, effectiveness in giving directions to a place, in giving instructions on how to use machinery, in analyzing and evaluating works of art, or in presenting views on current issues, are all increased by application of basic speech-making skills.

In this paper I want to clarify elements that distinguish a public speaking approach to the introductory course by looking at objectives of the course, course structure, teaching methods, problems in the course, and concluding with a prediction for the future.

OBJECTIVES OF THE COURSE

A public speaking course is one in which students learn to prepare and to present effective informative and persuasive
speeches. To accomplish these objectives students learn to select topics, write speech goals, analyze audiences and occasions, discover and create supporting material, state and organize main points, create introductions and conclusions, and develop a personal, effective speaking style that includes effective use of language and delivery.

The course may be conducted in individual sections or via a lecture-lab method. In either case, the emphasis of the course, often from one-half to two-thirds of the class meetings, involves speech making and speech criticism.

During a typical public speaking course, students gain experience in giving both informative and persuasive extemporaneous speeches, speeches that are well prepared and practiced, but that are neither memorized nor read. A one-quarter course (ten weeks of classes at three hours per week plus a final examination period) is likely to include a narrative or personal experience ice breaker, two informative and two persuasive speeches; a one-semester courses (fifteen weeks of classes at three hours per week plus final examination) is likely to include an ice-breaker, three informative and three persuasive speeches. Assigned speeches are likely to become longer and more complex as the term progresses.

COURSE STRUCTURE

Effective course planning is reflected in a well-written syllabus that includes course data (name of the instructor, office hours, title of the book, etc.), a course schedule, and ground rules for the course. Syllabi are usually given to students on the first day of the course.

Putting course information in writing is especially important, for the written syllabus establishes a kind of contract between the instructor and the student. The syllabus outlines student responsibilities while at the same time describing
limits to instructor procedure. If you indicate on the syllabus that speech outlines are required for each speech, but are not graded, students know that they must submit outlines, but their evaluation for the course will be based on some other kinds of assignments. But, if during the course, you announce that outlines are so bad that you are going to begin grading them, students will have every right to contest the validity of that policy. Of the grievances that are filed by students against teachers, a great majority have to do with policies that were not in writing.

Instructors usually discuss the syllabus on the first day of the course. Students should understand the rationale for speech assignments, attendance requirements, and evaluation.

**Speech Assignments**

Since a public speaking course is built largely on the preparation, presentation, and criticism of speeches, the bulk of the assignments are speech assignments.

**Types of speeches.** Although a typical course often opens with a narrative or personal experience speech assignment that gets students on their feet early in the quarter, emphasis is likely to be on informative and persuasive speeches. In informative speeches, students learn to present information that gets audience attention, facilitates understanding, and increases retention; in persuasive speeches students learn to build their credibility, support propositions with good reasons and evidence, and adapt their material to the needs of individual audiences. Two of the most common informative speech assignments are the explanation of a process and a report that requires student research; two of the most common persuasive speaking assignments are the speech in support of an idea and a speech designed to move an audience to action.
Time limits for speeches. The number and the length of speeches will depend upon the size of the class and the attitude of the instructor. Yet it is generally conceded that classroom speeches should be relatively short so that everyone in class can have several speaking experiences. Thus, time limits of three or four minutes for a beginning speech, building up to eight or ten minutes for the final speech are likely to be seen as appropriate. The lengthening of limits reflects the increased complexity of the speeches. Delivery, organization, and audience adaptation can be shown in short speeches; it takes longer to show depth of analysis, quality of content, idea development, and creativity.

The time limits for a speech are often expressed in flexible rather than absolute terms. Thus, the time limit for the first speech might be two to four minutes whereas the time limit for the final speech might be six to ten minutes. By giving a student a time range, you help the student develop a sense of time without encouraging memorization. It is also useful to enforce a maximum time. If time limits are not enforced, a two- to three-minute speech assignment soon becomes a three- to five- or a five- to seven-minute speech. As a result, speakers are sometimes deprived of the opportunity to speak because previous speeches ran overtime. When lack of time prohibits students from giving their speeches on assigned days, or cuts deeply into time needed for effective criticism, class morale deteriorates. When students learn that time limits will be taken seriously, they work to stay within them.

Speech outlines. A basic assumption of most public speaking courses is that written outlines contribute to good speech preparation. Most instructors favor a complete sentence outline that includes a list of sources. An outline is not a speech, nor is it meant to be. But the written outline can often be used as a diagnostic device to tell the instructor why the speech was good or bad. When a speech is poor, the outline will often reveal whether the poor quality was a result of faulty preparation or problems in presentation; likewise,
when a speech is good, the outline will reveal whether the good quality was by design or by accident.

**Attendance**

Since students will learn from listening to and criticizing speeches as well as from giving speeches, instructors often require attendance. A typical syllabus statement might say, "Speeches missed, regardless of cause, must be made up when time permits in order for the student to receive a passing grade for the course. Amount of reduced credit for a make-up speech, if any, will depend upon the nature of the absence and is entirely at the discretion of the instructor." If students see that they will have to be ready to give a speech at any time and perhaps have to wait a week or two before a time presents itself, they will be less likely to miss a speech.

**Evaluation**

One of the least pleasurable, but most important instructor responsibilities is evaluation. Grading speeches is difficult because instructors want to help students identify strengths and weaknesses without discouraging them. Beginning instructors often make the mistake of trying to grade each speech on all the criteria for good speech making and try to use the grade to show improvement. Grading is easier and more meaningful when the instructor determines the criteria for evaluation of each speech and then grades the speech in terms of those criteria. If, for a speech on explaining a process, the criteria include quality of organization and use of visual aids to facilitate understanding of the process, speeches that are well organized and that use visual aids effectively...
will receive a good grade even when those speeches have weaknesses in other categories. Likewise a speech that was well delivered, perhaps greatly improved over a previous speech, but was poorly organized and was ineffective in use of visual aids would receive a poor grade. When students are sure of the primary criteria for evaluation, then they can focus their practice on meeting those criteria. As the term progresses, each succeeding speech will be graded in part on the criteria that have been discussed in previous rounds; nevertheless, the key criteria should be those established for that round.

A second mistake is to give students so much of the benefit of the doubt that speech grades end up being higher than what the speeches were worth. A good method of checking validity of evaluations is to give a tentative grade to each student on the day of the speech and a firm grade at the end of the round. Instructors find that by looking at a group of speeches they find it easier to determine relative value.

The course evaluation combines grades for speeches and written work. Since the emphasis of the course is on speeches, speech grades should count more than test grades; but since students are also responsible for learning speech theory, test grades must be given enough weight to make a difference. Although there is no one best ratio of speech grades to written work, I favor counting speeches two-thirds and written work one-third of the final grade.

**TEACHING METHODS**

The primary teaching methods in a public speaking course include lecture, discussion, in-class exercises and speech criticism.
Class Lectures

Since most class time is devoted to student speeches and criticism, lecturing is likely to be kept to a minimum. Rather than preparing full class period lectures, instructors often have a series of mini-lectures that are used to cover essential information in short time blocks. Lectures can be particularly valuable to students when the instructor models the skills of good organization, stimulating idea development, clear and vivid language, and enthusiastic delivery, that students will be trying to develop. In a public speaking course, lectures may be used to serve at least four functions, to explain speech assignments, to clarify difficult concepts, to emphasize key points, and to dramatize abstract concepts of the textbook.

Explaining speech assignments. At least one week prior to the beginning of each round of speeches, instructors are likely to give short lectures that explain the speech assignments and clarify the key criteria for evaluating that assignment.

Clarifying difficult textbook concepts. In reading any textbook, students will find some concepts more difficult to understand than others. An instructor can anticipate which concepts are likely to be misunderstood and give a short lecture explaining these difficult concepts. For instance, since students often have trouble understanding Toulmin’s analysis of argument, especially the concept of “warrant,” an instructor may well give a lecture to explain the key concepts of reasoning.

Emphasizing key ideas. Since students often see every item of a chapter as of equal value, instructors can help students by giving short lectures that prioritize concepts of a chapter. For instance, in the text chapter on organizing speeches, an instructor may emphasize the importance of wording main points. Although the chapter contains many
topics, wording main points is certainly one of the most important.

Dramatizing abstract concepts. Finally, instructors can lecture to dramatize abstract concepts. For instance, in a chapter on speech content, students may not have a vivid picture of forms of idea development. Since these are so important to effective speech making, an instructor may give a mini-lecture dramatizing use of examples, illustrations, and comparisons.

Class Discussion

Class discussions are used so that students may show their understanding of chapter information. The value of class discussions is likely to be increased when the instructor plans a series of questions that cover the key points of a chapter.

Instructors often try to create an atmosphere that encourages free discussion. When a class is small enough, chairs can be placed in a circle so that everyone can see each other and students can be encouraged to talk without raising their hands. Instructors can reinforce student comments by saying, "Good point." they can probe for more information by saying such things as "Can you give me an example?" or "Can you show me how that might work?" and they can get closure on points by summarize responses.

In-Class Exercises

To help reinforce basic principles, instructors supplement lecture and discussion with in-class exercises. Most teacher's manuals that accompany texts include several exercises to choose from and many textbooks include exercises.
primary goal of an exercise is to help students apply what they have learned. For instance, during a class period discussing outlining, I like to use the "mixed-up outline" exercise to familiarize students with standard speech outlining form and content. In this exercise, the instructor finds or creates a well-written outline; types it without indentations and without Roman numerals, numbers, and letter designations; then cuts each outline apart so that each item is a separate entity. Each member of the class receives one complete cut-up outline. The goal of the exercise is for students to reorganize the outline into its original form, complete with Roman numerals and letters. By mixing lecture, discussion, and exercises, instructors can both increase student understanding and student involvement.

Speech Criticism

Students are likely to learn the most about speech making in general and about their individual needs in particular during oral and written criticism.

**Oral criticism.** A major feature of the public speaking approach to the introductory course is the large amount of time spent on oral criticism of speeches. Instructors' concerns include when to criticize and how to criticize.

Oral criticism may be given at the end of each speech or at the end of the day's speeches. Although criticizing speeches in turn brings out points when they are freshest and most meaningful to the student, when giving immediate criticism, the tendency is to spend a disproportionate amount of time on individual speeches. Moreover, immediate criticism tends to focus on details, and negative comments tend to dominate.

Many instructors prefer giving criticism at the end of the group of speeches. Although some of the immediacy may be lost, grouping speeches allows the instructor to compare and
contrast various procedures and to budget the time better. One way of maximizing time is to assign fewer speeches the first day or two so that more time is available for criticism. During the last day or two in a round, more speeches are assigned and less time is allocated to oral criticism. The rationale for this procedure is to take more time for criticism when it is most needed, at the start of a round, when both the speakers themselves and those who will be speaking later can profit, and to take less time when the majority of the class has already given the speech.

How to criticize speeches is especially important. Effective criticism focuses on speaker strengths, speaker weaknesses, and means of correcting mistakes. The challenging part of criticism is to discuss speaker weaknesses without destroying student morale. One of the advantages of grouping criticism is that the critic can point out good and bad practices without making any of the criticism too personal. For instance, by saying, "In today's speeches we heard and saw good examples of delivery and organization and examples of methods that needed to be improved. Those whose delivery was especially good looked at their audience. . . ." Using this method, the critic avoids calling attention to a particular speaker.

If you choose to say something about each speech, an effective method is first to point out one or two things that were good about the speech. Even the poorest of speeches should have some characteristic that can be praised ("Joe used a good example to illustrate his first point"). Then the critic mentions one or two things that were bad. Even if the speech had a dozen weaknesses, the critic should not attempt to focus on more than three. The critic wants to help the students and not overwhelm them with the sense of failure. Moreover, most students are not going to be able to correct more than one or two mistakes by the time of their next speech.

Critics also tell the students which improvement would be most desirable in the next speech. For instance: "Marge,
regardless of what else you do in your next speech, I want you to concentrate on making the main points so clear that everyone in class will know when you are stating a main point and will be able to recall the main points specifically."

Oral criticism is especially valuable when it focuses on key criteria for evaluation of that particular speech. Although each speech is a composite of content, organization, style and delivery, it is not necessary to cover every aspect of each of these areas in every critique. When instructors key their oral criticism to three or four criteria for each assignment, students will see the critique as far more of an educational experience. They will know that, in each speech, they should be paying special attention to those criteria because how well they are able to meet key criteria will determine their grade.

Most instructors like to involve students in the criticism process. Not only does student criticism give the speakers different perspectives, but also practice in criticism helps students sharpen their critical skills. In order to meet these goals, however, it is usually a good idea to structure the procedure. Students can be directed to focus on answers to specific questions that are keyed to the major criteria for evaluation for that round.

For instance, in a first round of speeches in which you choose to focus on organization and delivery, you might instruct class members to focus their comments on introductions that were especially attention getting, on sets of main points that were easily remembered, on conclusions really emphasized the point of the speech, and on delivery that was particularly enthusiastic. Identification of three or four categories stimulates students to listen well enough to make specific comments about key aspects of the speeches.

Many instructors like to be responsible for all the criticizing during the first round. During the second and third rounds, they bring students into the process, and during the final rounds, they may put the criticism almost entirely in the hands of the students.
Written criticism. Regardless of when and how oral criticism is given, instructors are likely to write critiques for each speaker. Written critique methods range from the blank sheet, in which instructors write their comments as they listen, to the detailed check sheet, in which instructors check a list of items. Many instructors prefer a critique sheet that indicates certain categories of comments, but that encourages written comments rather than merely check marks.

Critique sheets differ in many respects for each assignment. Although criteria for evaluation of subsequent speeches would probably include criteria of all past speeches, the grade and focus of criticism would be based upon the special criteria for that round.

One way of involving students in written criticism is to group the class so that when group A is speaking, group B is writing critiques (using the same critique form as the instructor), and groups C and D are listening. This method ensures that every speaker gets several written critiques instead of just one. Then during the criticism period, students can be asked to lead the discussion of the speeches.

PROBLEMS IN THE COURSE

Some of the most significant problems of the introductory course concern standardization in multi-section courses, textbook selection, and use and training of part-time instructors and graduate students who teach such a high percentage of the course in large universities.

Many schools try to solve problems of standardization by having workshops for all new instructors at the beginning of the year. Some schools use a common syllabus for all sections. And most schools try to involve all the experienced faculty in textbook selection.
Despite some of these problems, the public speaking approach is likely to have fewer problems largely because of the long tradition of the public speaking course.

THE FUTURE

I end this paper with a prediction that the emphasis on public speaking is likely to continue if not increase in the future. During the early 1970’s, many schools switched from a public speaking emphasis to an interpersonal emphasis. During the last 10 years many of those who made the switch have switched back to a public speaking approach. For the next 10 years, I believe that the public speaking approach and the hybrid approach will continue to be the most common approaches to the introductory course in most parts of the country.