Commentary: The Research Foundation for Instruction in the Beginning Public Speaking Course

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The history of communication education in the basic communication course is relatively short. Yet, the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, Plato, and Isocrates continue to dominate instruction and practice in the beginning public speaking course. The “ghosts” of these ancient rhetoricians continue to determine pedagogy in beginning public speaking courses. Yoder and Wallace (1995), in their Central States Communication Association Basic Course Committee award-winning paper, "What If Aristotle Had Never Lived," stressed the ongoing emphasis on Aristotle in teaching communication students. Frentz (1995), in his Southern States Communication Association Presidential Address, stated: "After 2500 years of fleeing our shadow, there are few places left to run. With nowhere to go and no time left to get there, we need to try something different. But what?" (SPECTRA). Although referring to our discipline's image in the social and behavioral sciences, Frentz's lament is also applicable to what instructors do in beginning public speaking courses. The history and current status of the beginning or basic course in communication has

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been documented several times (see recent issues of *The Basic Communication Course Annual*). These studies, along with a deliberate reading of popular public speaking textbooks, show the typical public speaking course to be dependent on the teachings of classical rhetoric for teaching students ways to develop and improve their communication skills. In other articles in the *Basic Communication Course Annual*, authors bemoan the fact that research on our instructional content and practices needs to be reflected in our texts and our classrooms. However, no one has attempted to articulate what research base exists for our instructional practices.

The basic public speaking course remains the most popular basic communication course. The latest survey (Gibson, et al., 1990), indicated that over 56% of speech communication departments offer the public speaking course as its basic course. Instructors’ assumptions that the skills taught in the beginning public speaking course increase student communication competence are also suspect. The reason for these doubts was articulated clearly by John Daly in his opening remarks to the participants of the Speech Communication Association 1994 Summer Conference on Communication Assessment. He indicated that the way communication instructors teach communication skills is not supported by research reported in our scholarly journals. He claimed this lack of research base creates major public relations nightmares for speech communication. This is especially true in light of the fact that for most students and many non-communication faculty on our campuses, the basic communication course is their only introduction to the communication discipline.

Additionally, Ivie and Lucaites (1995), responding to Frentz's concerns, stated "It [the communication discipline] thus concerns itself with the pragmatics of everyday discourse—with the study of how we use verbal and non-verbal symbols to convey ideas and attitudes persuasively..."
in order to manage differences of opinion on matters of im-
port" (p. 14). We agree with this fundamental description 
of communication instruction.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

With this in mind, the textbooks for the public speak-
ing course seem a logical place to begin our review of the 
research base for public speaking instruction. We exam-
ined the research base communication scholars claim sup-
ports how we teach public speaking. We examined the re-
search foundations of instruction for three elements im-
portant in beginning public speaking courses. We focused 
on the explanations of persuasive speaking, informative 
speaking, and audience analysis and adaptation in popular 
public speaking textbooks. Our specific research questions 
are:

[R1] Is what we teach in the basic public speaking 
course about persuasive speaking supported by 
research findings?

[R2] Is what we teach in the basic public speaking 
course about informative speaking supported by 
research findings?

[R3] Is what we teach in the basic public speaking 
course about audience analysis and audience ad-
aptation supported by research findings?

We examined these texts in a two-step process. First, 
we examined the appropriate portions in the textbooks. We 
used the glossaries in each book to guide our selection of 
data for review. Second, we examined the research base 
reported by the authors supporting their claims about per-
suasive speaking, informative speaking, and audience 
analysis and adaptation. We include representative sam-
ples of claims in the textbooks reviewed; we in no way
want the reader to believe that these are the only unsupported claims. We also want the reader to understand that there are claims that authors support with references. However, the references included to support some claims cite other textbooks or quote someone's opinion. There is little research cited that was designed to prove the claims.

PERSUASIVE SPEAKING

A common assignment in public speaking classes is the persuasive speech. Authors offer students a plethora of “how-to” suggestions on designing, preparing, and delivering a persuasive speech. The following is a representative list of author claims about how to design, prepare, and deliver a persuasive speech. The claims reported below are unsubstantiated because they lack supporting materials.

Unsupported Claims

• “People change gradually, in small degrees over a long period.”
• “As a general rule, never ask the audience to do what you have not done yourself. So, demonstrate your own willingness to do what you want the audience to do.”
• “As a public speaker, you have two major concerns with respect to reasoning. First, you must make sure your reasoning is sound. Second, you must try to get listeners to agree with your reasoning.”
• “Once you establish your overall persuasive goals, you must then decide the type and direction of the change you seek.”
• “Propositions are necessary because persuasion always involves more than one point of view.”
• “Evidence is more likely to be persuasive if it is new to the audience.”
• “Leadership is a more important issue in persuasive than informative speaking.”
• “How successful you are in any particular persuasive speech will depend above all on how well you tailor your message to the values, attitudes, and beliefs of your audience.”
• “If your listeners see you as competent, knowledgeable, of good character, and charismatic or dynamic, they will think you credible. As a result, you will be more effective in changing their attitudes or moving them to do something.”
• “Persuasion is more likely to take place when your audience has a positive attitude toward your goal, so it is crucial to assess the direction and strength of audience attitudes about your topic in general and specific goal in particular.”
• “Therefore, it [the Motivated Sequence] is especially suited for speeches that have action as their goal.”
• “It [the Motivated Sequence] follows the process of human thinking and leads the listener step by step to the desired action.”
• “Persuasion is impossible without attention.”
• “Explanations in the form of statistics (etc) . . . ensure that your audience understands exactly what you mean.”
• “Understanding the basis for Maslow’s hierarchy is critical to your success as a persuasive speaker, for if you approach your listeners at an appropriate level of need, you will find them unable or unwilling to respond.”
• “Good organization will improve your credibility. So will appropriate, clear, vivid language. So will flu-
ent, dynamic delivery. So will strong evidence and cogent reasoning.”

• “Present vivid images of the need for action. Show your listeners how the quality of their lives—how even their survival—depends on prompt action.”

INFORMATIVE SPEAKING

A second major assignment in the public speaking course is the informative speech. We examined the claims advanced to help students design, prepare, and deliver informative speeches. The following are representative claims typical of all unsupported claims in the textbooks reviewed. In this section, claims used by the authors to explain the preparation and delivery of informative speeches are presented.

Unsupported Claims

• “Things that are personally related to our needs or interests attract our attention.”
• “The power of informative speaking to influence our perceptions can serve a pre-persuasive function, preparing us for later persuasive speaking.”
• “If you want the audience to listen to your speech, be sure to relate your information to their needs, wants, or goals.”
• “Generate enough interest in the information to arouse the audience’s attention.”
• “To be effective, speeches of explanation must be connected to the real world.”
• “. . . to increase the likelihood that your audience will listen to you, make sure that you are perceived as being credible.”
• “A responsible informative speech should cover all major positions on a topic and present all vital information.”
• “Audiences are more likely to show interest in, understand, and remember information that is presented creatively.”
• “Avoid telling your audience what it already knows . . . they don’t want to hear what they already know.”
• “All people have a deep-seated hunger for knowledge and insight. Part of the informative speaker’s job is to feed this hunger.”
• “Tie key points to anecdotes and humor.”
• “Humorous stories are effective in helping the audience remember material.”
• “Asking your audience to absorb new information presented in a disorganized fashion is asking too much.”
• “Audio visual aids will help you describe almost anything.”

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS AND ADAPTATION

In addition to the claims about how to design, prepare, and deliver persuasive and informative speeches, many claims about audience analysis and adaptation are included. The following lists of claims explaining audience analysis and adaptation were discovered in each of the textbooks.

Unsupported Claims

• “Now let us consider the specific areas in which it is most important to have accurate data [for audience analysis]: age, education, gender, occupation, in-
come, race, religion, and nationality, geographic
uniqueness, and group affiliations.”

- “You need to gather as much information as you can
about these factors [demographics] as you plan and
prepare your speech.”

- “Different age-groups have different attitudes and
beliefs largely because they have had different expe-
riences in different contexts. . . . Young people have
strong needs to be evaluated positively by their peer
group—group identification is very important to the
young.”

- “You are also likely to find a well-educated audience
more open minded, more willing to at least listen to
new proposals, and more accepting of social and
technological changes than less well-educated audi-
ences.”

- “Knowing which social groups are represented in
your audience and what they stand for is important
for effective audience adaptation.”

- “By finding out the average age of your listeners, you
can avoid being on one side of the age gap and hav-
ing your audience on the other.”

- “Information about your audience’s beliefs, attitudes,
and values can be vital in planning your speech.”

- “For either informative or persuasive speeches,
education level is an excellent predictor of audience
interest and knowledge.”

- “You can better estimate your listeners’ knowledge of
and interest in a topic from their educational level
than from their age or gender.”

- “Gender role differences do exist and generalizations
based on these differences are not necessarily wrong
. . . also a fact that more men than women are sports
fans.”
• “Traditionally, men have been found to place greater importance on theoretical, economic, and political values. . . . women are generally more relationally oriented than men are. Women express their feelings more readily than men do.”
• “You can determine how much your listeners know about your topic by the nature of the occasion.”
• “This advice is based on a sound psychological principle: The more different kinds of explanation a speaker gives, the more listeners will understand.”
• “. . . when speakers fail to realize that religious beliefs may also define moral attitudes about issues like abortion [etc.] . . . they risk alienating their audience.”
• “You need to consider and address differences of opinion [such as racial or ethnic ties].”
• “Because people often identify themselves in terms of their work, it is important to know the types of jobs or the nature of the work they do.”
• “Understanding your audience attitudes, beliefs, and values will help you put your message in terms most likely to succeed.”
• “The following suggestions will help you build the types of audience connection that defines the reciprocal nature of public speaking . . . . Get to the point quickly . . . have confidence your audience wants to hear you speak.”
• “If you can appeal to the common values in your speeches to a diverse audience, you can often unite your listeners behind your ideas or suggestions.”
DISCUSSION

What can we conclude about the research foundations of the authors’ discussions of persuasive speaking, informative speaking, and audience analysis and adaptation? There are several conclusions we believe to be supported by our review of the textbooks.

Conclusion #1

Our first conclusion is based on our observation that there are many unsupported assertions included in public speaking texts. Defenders of this approach to writing about speaking suggest that these are common sense ideas to the preparation and delivery of a speech. The “common sense” rationale is not sufficient to warrant the boldness with which the authors make their claims. Defenders also suggest that this practice does little, if any, harm in the classroom. The central question remains, however, that unsupported claims offered as practical advice for students need proper research support or need to be identified as something other than fact.

Since many of these claims are not supported, it is inconceivable to us that they are advanced as if they were fact. They are not fact; they are mere conjecture seemingly based on tradition and historic practice. These conjectures need to be presented as just that—mere conjectures. It would be better to admit that these ideas are simply pieces of advice based on the rich tradition of teaching public speaking and/or a wealth of practical experience. Defenders of this approach might argue that the claims do not need supporting research. Are we willing to simply accept this position?

The fact remains: the claims in each of the texts offer little research-based advice to the student-speaker for a suc-
successful speech. Translating unsubstantiated claims from a text to practice is difficult.

Conclusion #2

The overall concern of communication teachers in the beginning public speaking course is to teach students the theories, skills, and practices of public speaking. Offering students platitudes and poorly-supported assertions do not prepare them for the public speaking situation. Communication educators need to remember they are not writing bumper stickers or sayings for greeting cards, they are trying to instruct students in “the art of public speaking.”

Communication educators need to help students increase their communication competence as public speakers. The multiple unsupported claims offered in texts offer the student no proven practice techniques or public speaking skills to help them increase their competence. Public speaking competence, as a goal of instruction in the beginning communication course, seems reasonable. There are little data or few claims included in any of the texts reviewed that offer students ways of being more competent public speaker.

There is little information in any of the texts, even when the author offers some documentation, that test the authors’ claims related to public speaking preparation and practice. Several authors cite Monroe, et al. as support for the Motivated Sequence. Others cite Maslow as the source for using the needs hierarchy in the speech preparation process; whether in persuasive speaking or audience analysis. Citing other authors who created an idea but failed to prove it or other testimonials seems weak support for the broad generalizations suggested in the texts as the way to prepare and present public speeches. Another option is that the research is ignored in the preparation of our texts. If the research is there, then it should be reported.
Conclusion #3

In our opinion, if the instructors received such unsupported and unsubstantiated claims in a student paper, they would find that unacceptable. Each text includes a major section or chapter on the use and importance of supporting materials. If we held the claims advanced in public speaking texts up to the scrutiny of the authors’ suggestions for using supporting materials, how would they measure up? It seems to us that the claims would not pass.

It is curious that communication educators conclude that offering unsubstantiated claims in the name of “teaching public speaking” is acceptable. Not only would these same people not accept this practice in papers from their students, editors of communication journals would not accept this practice from authors of manuscripts. This practice is acceptable in textbooks for the basic public speaking course. To accept poor or weak documentation in communication textbooks suggests that instruction in the beginning public speaking course is not nearly as important as some of these other activities or in need of any justification.

Conclusion #4

The claim advanced by John Daly during the 1994 SCA Summer Conference that little evidence exists to support how we teach beginning oral communication skills is consistent with our analysis. There is little support offered for the ways public speaking is taught. We are not concluding that all claims are unsupported; there are claims that are supported and, therefore, appear more credible. However, based on our review, most of the claims advanced about public speaking instruction are unsupported.

This should be an area of great concern for communication educators interested in the basic course.
needs to be conducted to test the advice offered to students to improve their public speaking competencies. Communication researchers owe this to the students in the beginning public speaking course, the instructors teaching these courses, as well as to the communication discipline.

The fact that these claims are not supported is an obvious gap in our research. It causes us to pause and ask why does this gap exist. Perhaps the basic communication course is not viewed to be as important as other research interests by communication scholars. Although speculation on our part, there is evidence that the basic communication course is not too important. First, most of these sections are taught by less experienced instructors—graduate teaching assistants who receive inconsistent training and must rely heavily on the textbook as their source of instructional information. Second, there is a lack of scholarly research in communication journals studying the teaching of public speaking. Most of the research on the basic course is opinion-based, based on personal preference or personal experience.

**Conclusion #5**

The research we are calling for in the basic course is not difficult to conduct. Many unsupported assertions can be tested. Here are a few research questions that could be tested rather easily:

- Is the Motivated Sequence a useful tool for the speaker and the audience in a persuasive communication context?
- Will the speaker be more successful if they adapt their speech to their listeners’ demographics? Values? Attitudes?
- Are listeners more likely to be involved in the public speaking situation if they “like” the topic?
Some research questions have been studied. The problem is that many of the results of this research are not cited in the textbooks. In seeking answers to these questions and reporting the results, scholars would advance our current understandings of public speaking pedagogy and practice. Is there a fear that if these research questions are studied, we might discover that they are not be supported? Regardless of any fear, communication educators must get involved with instructional research and provide the research results that support claims advanced in our public speaking textbooks. If we commence this line of research, students can learn and practice public speaking skills with confidence and we can hold our heads high as communication educators.

REFERENCES


