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Janis L. King
Missouri State University

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Re-Focusing the Basic Public Speaking Course: Changing to an Epideictic Framework to Create Community

Janis L. King

On February 4, 2002, Book TV (on C-SPAN 2) had a three-hour discussion/interview with the author Toni Morrison. As I sat listening to the commentator’s and callers’ inquiries, I learned much about Ms. Morrison’s writings and about her approach to literature. But it was her answer to a particular question that truly caught my attention. Ms. Morrison was asked how she went about preparing her speech when she received the Nobel Prize for Literature. She replied that the prize committee had provided her with a guideline; she was to give a lecture/speech in a style that was related to the reason for which she won the prize. In other words, the committee did not want the traditional speech that we, who teach public speaking courses, often teach and/or use. They wanted something different from the norm, something unique. This brief moment during this cable television program caused me to consider if the expectations for public speaking were/are changing, and if so, what changes should be introduced into public speaking classes.

In order to investigate possible changes in public speaking, I turned to the Nobel Prize Committee’s archives of speeches/lectures. If the committee had asked Ms. Morrison to create a speech in the vein or mode of her award, had previous committees also made this re-
quest of other recipients? While working on this particular quest, I had a rather fortunate conversation with a student who was a Communication major. Megan Smith spent the Spring 2002 semester as a legislative intern and brought her portfolio to my office for me to peruse. Her comment about the criticism she received when she wrote the first speech for this legislator extended our conversation to a discussion of the basic and advanced public speaking courses. These courses did not prepare her for the requirements and requests from this legislator. This legislator vehemently did not want the traditional speech with an introduction, body, and conclusion. So with the student’s approval, I began to look at the finished presentations that she created and that the legislator delivered in hopes of further answering the question: What are the requirements and expectations for public speaking?

This article will first look at five speeches given by various Nobel Prize winners to determine if speakers were asked to prepare and deliver something other than the traditional speech. Secondly, a review of Megan Smith’s legislator’s speeches, which were delivered in public and received media coverage, will be conducted. Lastly, this essay will suggest the reason for the new expectations and provide a new framework for public speaking courses.

When I began to research the Swedish Academy/Nobel Prize expectations for speeches, I quickly learned that there were no such requirements in print. Toni Morrison’s comment that she was informed that the committee anticipated a presentation much like her writings may have been delivered verbally. Consequently, I began to look at various speeches available through the
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Nobel Prize’s website and through the web sites of many of the recipients. After reading William Faulkner’s speech of December 10, 1950 and then the speeches of the two 1951 winners in chemistry, I was able to see the beginnings of what Ms. Morrison was asked to do. I then decided to find a later speech and chose the Dalai Lama’s speech in accepting the 1989 prize for peace.

I selected the Faulkner speech because of its date and of the nature of the prize. By December 1950, television programming and coverage was expanding. More and more people in the United States and in European countries were purchasing television sets. Public events such as the Nobel Prize dinner and speeches were covered by not only print but also broadcast news media. William Faulkner was a well-known writer by this time and the likelihood that his speech might receive extended coverage especially by American media was a possibility. In addition, I looked for but found no instructions issued by the committee about the content or style of the speech.

The first paragraph of Faulkner’s (1950) speech is not a standard introduction as taught to students in public speaking courses. He begins:

I feel that this award was not made to me as a man, but to my work—a life’s work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit, not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before. So this award is only mine in trust. . . . [I would like to use] this moment as a pinnacle from which I might be listened to by the young men and women already dedicated to the same anguish and travail, among whom is already that one who will some day stand where I am standing.
Faulkner (1950) proceeds to identify the fear for all: “Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only one question: When will I be blown up?” He (1950) later continues, “He must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid: and, teaching himself that, forget it forever.”

After he expands on the problems that will occur if he does not forget, Faulkner (1950) concludes: “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.”

Faulkner’s speech reflects the reason for his winning. Faulkner’s novels include themes of endurance, spirit, sacrifice, and compassion. Faulkner’s works gave voice not to him but to humans and the spirit within them to survive. His goal in this speech appears to create a community of writers who “help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past” (Faulkner, 1950) and as well to shape the human community.

After examining Faulkner’s speech, I reviewed other speeches of the same time period to see if the presentation seemed to relate to the reason why a person won a Nobel Prize. I sought speeches by scientists in hopes of eliminating the literary style of speaking demonstrated by Faulkner. I chose Dr. Glenn Seaborg and Dr. Edwin McMillan, the winners of the 1951 prize in chemistry. Both were Americans and thus should have been familiar with the speaking expectations within the American
society. As Americans, their winning and subsequent speeches possibly would be covered by American media, just as occurs today. Scientists are generally known for being succinct and for avoiding wordiness as a way to maintain a sense of objectiveness. These two men certainly achieved this standard. Dr. McMillan’s speech consisted of 123 words while Dr. Seaborg’s speech had 171 words. After the customary opening remarks expressing the honor of receiving the award, both men proceeded to explain the award’s meaning.

Dr. McMillan (1951) explains that “there has never been in the history of the world any other prize or honor with the international recognition accorded to the Nobel Prize. One reason for this is that it is truly an international honor, given with regard to achievement only.” He concludes with the following sentence: “The world would be a more agreeable place if similar ideals governed more of its affairs.” For Edwin McMillan the ideal is something based on a proven achievement. Subjective opinions based on differences of political systems, race or economics obviously lead to disagreement, especially in world affairs. Judging people on what they have done or are capable of doing is preferred as a way to bring the world together.

Dr. Seaborg gave his speech in Swedish, the language of his immediate audience. Glenn Seaborg was of Swedish descent so he knew a few words learned from his mother and paternal grandfather. Dr. Seaborg (1951) notes: “The Nobel Prize has a high value among scientists over the whole world. Indeed, it is the highest honor that a researcher can obtain.” After honoring the Swedish Royal Academy of Science and the Swedish Royal Family, he concludes by saying: “I can only hope that the
new elements that we have found will be used for the
good of mankind. And finally, I would like to thank the
Academy for honoring me and my co-workers in the
manner that they have.” Glenn Seaborg speaks of new
discoveries aiding humans and, like McMillan, suggests
that the new elements make the world a better place.

While McMillan and Seaborg did not fill their
speeches with chemical formulas, they did reflect scien-
tific expectations for style and content. Being succinct
and emphasizing achievement by proof appeared in the
scientific field. Both also spoke to their immediate audi-
ence, those in attendance, and thus create a sense of
community within the room while talking about commu-
nity worldwide.

The next speech which I examined is delivered by the
Dalai Lama when he received the Nobel Prize for peace.
The Dalai Lama’s speech is by far the lengthiest of the
speeches discussed to this point (Faulkner’s speech is
four paragraphs in length.). And like the two scientists
his opening remarks are about the honor and happiness
the award brings. Once the niceties were over, the Dalai
Lama moves quickly to the themes of the struggles
against oppression, freedom, and world peace, the very
reasons why he won the prize. The second paragraph of
the speech details why he (1989) accepts the award:

I accept the prize with profound gratitude on behalf of
the oppressed everywhere and for all those who strug-
gle for freedom and work for world peace. I accept it as
a tribute to the man who founded the modern tradition
of non-violent action for change Mahatma Gandhi
whose life taught and inspired me. And, of course, I ac-
cept it on behalf of the six million Tibetan people, my
brave countrymen and women inside Tibet, who have
suffered and continue to suffer so much. . . . The prize reaffirms our conviction that with truth, courage and determination as our weapons, Tibet will be liberated.

In the third paragraph, the Dalai Lama (1989) extends his comments to all people:

No matter what part of the world we come from, we are all basically the same human beings. We all seek happiness and try to avoid suffering. We have the same basic human needs and are [sic] concerns. All of us human beings want freedom and the right to determine our own destiny as individuals and as peoples. That is human nature.

As the Dalai Lama approaches the end of this fourteen paragraph speech, he refers to his position as a Buddhist monk and his concern for all people. He (1989) explains:

I believe all suffering is caused by ignorance. People inflict pain on others in the selfish pursuit of their happiness or satisfaction. Yet true happiness comes from a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. We need to cultivate a universal responsibility for one another and the planet we share.

The speech ends after another four short paragraphs with the last paragraph beginning with the words “I pray for all of us.” While the wording of this speech is straight forward and not literary in style, it clearly is neither similar to the scientists’ speeches nor Faulkner’s more literary nature. But it does reflect the Dalai Lama’s public persona. He does not devote much time to the greatness of the honor but moves quickly to the typical themes of his public messages. He uses this time to continue his argument against oppression and suffering.
This speech could be delivered in other situations without changing much of the content. So if the Dalai Lama was asked to create a speech in the style for which he won the prize, he did so. In addition, he emphasizes the connection between all humans which, like the other speakers, creates a worldwide community.

Lastly, I want to examine Toni Morrison’s speech, the reason why I became interested in looking at the effect of requested format, style, and/or content. Ms. Morrison’s speech is the lengthiest of the presentations reviewed for this paper and is divided into two parts. The first is labeled “Lecture” while the second part is subtitled “Speech of Acceptance.” Both were presented on December 7, 1993 in Stockholm. The opening of the longest portion, the “Lecture,” begins “Members of the Swedish Academy, Ladies and Gentlemen: Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge” (Morrison, 1994, p. 7). The lecture concerns a blind woman, who is respected in her community, and some young people who visit her to test the women’s wisdom. The young people ask her to tell them if the bird held by one person is living or dead. The old blind woman does not answer because she “only knows their motive” (Morrison, 1994, p. 11). The young people continue to ask the same question until finally the woman speaks:

“I don’t know. . . . I don’t know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands” (Morrison, 1994, p. 11).

Morrison (1994) continues her explanation by stating “So I choose to read the bird as language and the woman as a practiced writer” (p. 12). This story allows Morrison
to discuss the various aspects of language usage that “kill” it (1994, p. 14). As she continues her narrative concerning language, she (1994) presents the following lengthy paragraph to prove the link between language and knowledge:

Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity-driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek—it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing language of mastery, and cannot, do not, permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (pp. 15-17).

Morrison brings her lecture to an end when she returns to discuss the young people who visit the old blind woman. These people are confused by the woman’s answer and seek more information from her. They tell her that they “are young. Unripe. We have heard all our short lives that we have to be responsible” (Morrison, 1994, p. 26). At the end they ask the woman to “make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (Morrison, 1994, p. 27). Morrison (1994) allows the old blind woman to end the narra-
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“Finally, . . ., I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done-together.” (p. 30)

Toni Morrison’s twenty-three-page lecture is now complete. It certainly does not follow the format expected of a traditional speech. There is no introduction, and in fact, she used the old phrase “Once upon a time” to move from the opening three sentences into the conversation between the woman and young people. There is no conclusion that summarizes the points of her speech. She does, however, emphasize the theme which she wants her listeners to remember; the old woman reminds the audience that they just did something together when Morrison used language to create a sense of knowledge for them. The body of her lecture is the narrative which allows her to use the metaphors of bird and old woman to teach her audience about language and knowledge, about inquisitiveness and knowledge, and about trust between the writer and her readers/listeners. It emphasizes working together for the creation of knowledge and points to a creation of community.

Toni Morrison’s (1994) acceptance speech which follows the closing comment of the old woman sounds much like William Faulkner’s speech as he spoke of future writers. She (1994) states:

I will leave this hall, however, with a new and much more delightful haunting than the one I felt upon entering; that is the company of the laureates yet to come. Those who, even as I speak, are mining, sifting and polishing languages for illuminations none of us has dreamed of. But whether or not any one of them secures a place in this pantheon, the gathering of these
writers is unmistakable and mounting. Their voices bespeak civilizations gone and yet to be; the precipice from which their imaginations gaze will rivet us; they do not blink or turn away. (pp. 32-33)

It is not until the last sentence of this second part that Toni Morrison (1994) finally accepts “the honor the Swedish Academy has done me” (p. 33)

When Toni Morrison appeared on Book TV on Sunday, February 4, 2002, she explained her choice of the narrative in the lecture and acceptance speech. She used the narrative because it is how people figure out things; it is how we learn; it is how we come to know who we are. She chose the story of a blind person because this character appears in all cultures or societies of the world, and thus would be familiar to the various members of her immediate audience as well as any one who would later read her speech. She allowed the teens to question the old woman as a way to give the young people “agency” to question knowledge and tradition in their community. (Morrison, 2002)

The final example of public speaking that I wish to discuss comes from a student in my department. Megan Smith was a senior (and currently is a graduate student) who I had in a class prior to her legislative internship and who I had in class after her return to campus. Megan spent a semester as an intern for an influential representative. (The name of the representative will not be used in this paper to honor Megan’s request.) Megan wrote speeches as well as news/press releases and a brochure during her time in this representative’s office. This essay focuses only on the speeches researched and developed for this legislator.
One of Megan’s first assignments was to create a speech about the accomplishments of a university. Megan, thinking that the legislator wanted a standard speech, researched the nature of the honor being given to the university and created a complete speech. She gave the speech to the legislator’s assistant who immediately told Megan that this was wrong. (Smith, personal communication, 2002) The representative did not want an introduction, no supporting materials, and no conclusion. The entire speech should be devoted to “talking points.” Megan revised her initial speech until it was acceptable. The final version fit on one sheet of paper and consisted of three points, each of which noted the accomplishments of the university and which could be used by the media who covered the event. As I looked at the speech in Megan’s portfolio, it appeared as if this speech could be photocopied and handed out to media representatives. A speech became the press release. Or, in other words, the speech was written as a press release.

Each of the other four speeches that Megan wrote for this representative were in a similar format. One three-point speech concerned a large donation to a university to build an agricultural center. Another speech spoke of the men and women of law enforcement; it had five points about respect and acknowledging the work of law enforcement. The third spoke about deceased members of the House of Representatives by covering three points. The fourth concerned funding for education, consisted of four points, and was presented to attendees at a PTA convention. All four of these presentations were entitled “Talking Points,” were one page in length, and consisted of three to five points. (Smith, Speeches, 2002) Megan was told not to include examples, statistics, illustrations,
etc. The legislator would ad lib if necessary. (Smith, personal communication, 2002) The knowledge and skills that Megan learned in her undergraduate public speaking courses were of no use. In fact she was told to forget that information. (Smith, personal communication, 2002)

What my conversation with Megan illustrates is that, if the above mentioned legislator is representative of all, public officials no longer present traditional speeches. The speech is prepared and presented as a press release which may be used by broadcast and print news personnel who cover the event. I venture to suggest that a news reporter would not need to be at the speaking event if she/he received the “Talking Points” one-page speech. A videographer/cameraperson shows up, picks up the one-page speech, films a few minutes of tape, and leaves. Later a reporter may do a voice-over for the tape and thus a news item is created. A traditional speech would be too complex in details, too convoluted.

From the examples examined for this paper, I suggest that public speaking is changing. This is not a recent or current happening but began when broadcast media developed with the availability of home television sets. People stay home more and rely on media to learn about local, state, national, and international events. Coverage of such events as the Kennedy/Nixon campaign debates and later John Kennedy’s assassination caught people’s attention. The live telecasts of presidents’ State of the Union addresses demonstrate changes in public speaking as the year’s progress. Even the Democratic and Republican political conventions’ speeches are shorter in length. The criticism of former President Bill Clinton’s Democratic keynote address because the speech was too long serves to illustrate the changes in require-
ments and expectations for a public speech. No area of public speaking is left out of these changes. Media demands short, easily covered and entertaining presentations and thus the public comes to expect the same thing in a live presentation.

Those of us who teach public speaking, complete public address studies, and/or critique rhetoric must work with these changes in requirements and expectations. I propose that the first place to start is with courses in public speaking. The traditional basic course must be revised/adjusted to accommodate the changing requirements and expectations, so that students will be prepared for their professional lives. Clearly, Megan felt as if her courses did not prepare her for the responsibilities of her internship and future career goals. Based on the speeches discussed in this paper, I propose the following philosophical change.

Past courses in public speaking have emphasized the deliberative form of speaking as outlined and explained by Aristotle and later Cicero. That students would be able to inform and persuade audiences about topics focused instructors and students on a particular idea of speaking following designated formats. At times, the concept of audience as active participants in the process seemed to disappear. Public speaking became formulaic and primarily concerned the duties of the speaker while relegating listening as the audience’s only duty. What I propose is to revise the basic public speaking courses using ideas described by Celeste Condit when she examines the functions that epideictic speeches serve for speakers and audiences. All of the examples of speeches from the Nobel Prize recipients and from the legislator are epideictic in nature. In fact, I suggest that most pub-
Public speaking situations today are more epideictic than deliberative in nature. To help university students prepare for their future professions, we need to restructure the basic course to make it a shared, interactive process involving the speaker and the audience.

Condit identifies and explains the functions of epideictic in an article using the Boston Massacre orations. She (1985) defines epideictic as “public communication that serves a three-fold set of paired functions for audiences and speakers” (p. 284). These pairs of functions are “understanding and definition, sharing and creation of community, and entertainment and display” (Condit, 1985, p. 284). Condit makes the audience equally as important as the speaker in public speaking situations. Simply inviting the audience to participate as listener is not sufficient; they must have responsibility in the process.

Condit (1985) expands the function of understanding and definition when she discusses the power that epideictic has in explaining the social world. She notes: “audiences actively seek and invite speech that performs this epideictic function when some event, person, group, or object is confusing or troubling” (p. 288). The speaker may help audiences understand by using the audience’s beliefs and values as a way to provide a sense of knowledge and perhaps even comfort. Condit identifies “commencement addresses, declarations of war, introductions, and funeral orations” (1985, p. 288) as fitting into this pair of functions. In addition, I suggest that the typical business report or public relations message fall into this category when people need to make sense of problematic or changing ideas and events.
The creating/shaping and sharing community functions are linked to the defining and understanding pair. One way to shape a community is to provide explanations or definitions of “major shared experiences” (Condit, 1985, p. 289). Speakers are called forth to help members of the community understand changes and in doing so, the audience “gives the speaker the right to select certain values, stories, and persons from the shared heritage and to promote them over others” (Condit, 1985, p. 289). In fact, people who disagree with the speaker's description and definition will often feel alienated from the community (Condit, 1985). Condit (1985) identifies “Fourth of July orations, campaign rallies, opening ceremonies, and inaugurals” (p. 290) as using the functional pair of shaping and sharing community. Community organizations' presentations will also fall into these functions. The speaker creates a sense of community or connectedness while the audience actively seeks to understand the stories' explanations. There is equal involvement in the speaking process.

The last pair identified by Condit seems to be the forgotten ideas that speaking allows a person to be eloquent by displaying their knowledge and talent and that an audience may expect to be entertained. Ideally a speaker should be as creative as possible in hopes of providing an interesting, educational, and entertaining experience for the audience. But the current teaching practices in the basic public speaking course encourage, if not require, students to follow a set pattern with little or no leeway for a student to develop her/his own style. We teach the three parts of the speech with each part consisting of certain items. We demand that students outline the speech and thus require students to have a cer-
tain numbers of main points, subpoints, and supporting material. We seem to fear creativity which occurs primarily because we are forced to grade students. And students want definite guidelines so that they know exactly what to do so that they get a good grade. Condit recognizes that many of the traditional speeches fall into this display/entertainment category. “Keynote addresses, acceptance speeches, and after-dinner talks . . . provide the speaker a chance for a unique and important form . . . Epideictic oratory may thus provide the most humane of human entertainments and a most important public display” (Condit, 1985, p. 291).

I suggest that instructors emphasize the functions of displaying and entertaining by encouraging students to be different. When asked if a speech is to be entertaining, the majority of students will respond that a speech is more likely to be boring. Students today dread attending public speaking events on campus because they presume that the experience will be boring and a waste of time. To compensate for this perception, we require students to attend public speaking events through the standard assignment or through the use of extra credit points. It is when public speaking becomes interesting that speakers may fulfill the first two functional pairs. We need people who are able to explain and define knowledge, events, and values to audiences because then we achieve the sense of community which is important for local, national, and international success in working together. We need audiences who are actively involved and who accept responsibility for understanding, sharing of community, and expecting speakers to be entertaining. The speeches examined earlier in this essay achieved this goal and by doing so each speaker showed how peo-
ple may come together for the betterment of humankind. The creation of community based on shared knowledge and values helps people to resolve differences whether these disagreements occur in government, business, or personal situations.

After completing my study of the earlier speeches, I changed my last two assignments for one section that I was teaching. The result was that I had the best set of final speeches in the 22 years that I have taught college public speaking courses. I utilized Condit’s functional pairs to have students interview faculty members in the students’ majors, to complete reports on speaking requirements for various majors, and then allowed them to do whatever they wanted for the final presentation as long as the student employed faculty suggestions and spoke on a topic relevant to the student’s major. The two students who had high speaking anxiety were so much better that their classmates verbally complimented them. Another student, who had always been very serious, displayed a wonderful sense of wit and humor and her classmates stayed after class to ask her more questions when normally they would be out the door as quickly as possible. Once freed from requirements and allowed to be themselves, the students became better speakers. They chose to explain and define ideas that the audience should understand, to create a sense of community by sharing information and stories relevant to their classmates, and to entertain the audience. Every student in this section was notably a better speaker. These students as audience accepted the responsibility of being equal participants in the public speaking process. They asked questions, complimented each other, eagerly participated in activities associated with a presentation,

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and finally became a cohesive group which had not occurred earlier in the semester. They became a “community”.

I encourage instructors to dare to be different in their teaching strategies for the basic public speaking course. I know that this is difficult when there are multiple sections taught by a variety of people with the expectation that all sections cover much the same information. But we are producing less than effective speakers who see little, if any, relevance in the course material and to their future professional and personal lives. Based on the speeches that I examined, society prefers, and in some instances demands, unique and different types of public speaking. The idea that the traditional speech is uninteresting and a waste of time has spread beyond the classroom. The future of public speaking rests in the hands of instructors and directors of the basic public speaking course.

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