


1996

Diversity in the Public Speaking Course: Beyond Audience Adaption

Christine Kelly
Otterbein College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca>

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), [Other Communication Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kelly, Christine (1996) "Diversity in the Public Speaking Course: Beyond Audience Adaption," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 8 , Article 14.

Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol8/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Basic Communication Course Annual by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Diversity in the Public Speaking Course: Beyond Audience Adaptation

Christine Kelly

Most approaches to public speaking are based on the works of Plato, Aristotle and other classical Greek scholars and have not been updated to include the views of women or minority scholars who can make great contributions to our understanding of rhetoric and public speaking (Gregory, 1993; Hanna and Gibson, 1989; Osborn and Osborn, 1994). The few attempts that have been made to include women and minorities in textbooks are generally limited to the inclusion of a speech or two by a woman or minority speaker or hints on how to be sensitive to gender and culture issues in audience analysis. For example, Gronbeck, McKerrow, Ehninger and Monroe (1990) include a section in the language chapter on "Views of Women's Communication" and in the appendix there is a discussion of "Gender and Communication." Hanna and Gibson (1989) have a short paragraph in their language chapter on stereotypic language. Gregory (1993) has a brief paragraph in his language chapter on sexist language, and Verderber (1988) mentions sexist and racist language. Although this is not a complete content analysis of all public speaking texts, these examples are representative of the way gender and diversity are dealt with in basic public speaking texts.

But since the speeches by women and minorities and methods of adaptation are viewed within the context of a traditional Western, male dominated view of public speaking, this does nothing to help students see beyond the traditional

model. Students need the opportunity to explore other methods of giving voice to ideas that involve exposing them to different models of speech preparation and presentation. When I was at the University of Maine, I and two of my colleagues created a supplemental reader for public speaking courses that incorporates the voices of women and minority speakers into the public speaking curriculum (Kelly, Laffoon, and McKerrow, 1994).

We hope this course reader will revolutionize the way public speaking is taught at the University of Maine and perhaps other universities. The goal for this reader is not only to introduce students to their speeches, but to introduce them to some of the different methods of organization, uses of evidence, modes of proof and styles of presentation that are used by women and minority speakers. Assignments encourage students to look at similarities and differences in the models presented and to incorporate their own personal styles into the development and presentation of speeches.

The genesis of this project was a frustration in recent years with the content of the basic public speaking course. In reading more about the communication styles of women and different minority groups I realized that much of what we teach students in the public speaking course violates the cultural views of students, especially those who are non-white and non-male. Until reading more about the use of eye contact in Japanese culture, I held my Japanese students to the same standard for eye contact as my other students. Communication educators typically also expect African-American students to conform to the textbook method of organization and delivery. Whether a new graduate teaching assistant, just learning the art of teaching public speaking, or a seasoned veteran in communication instruction, we all struggle with the same issue of how to reconcile culturally-biased expectations while being told to be more culturally sensitive. In order to make our courses more culturally diverse and

gender sensitive, we need to re-examine not only the content of the course, but also our methods of evaluating our students.

When instructors evaluate students, they compare the student's speech to "objective" standards for good speech as outlined in the course text. If the text is not sensitive to cultural or gender issues, then we are not considering the very real cultural and gender constraints facing some of our students. By asking them to meet the standards of the Western culture, we are often asking them to ignore and/or deny their own cultures.

In addition, most authors of public speaking texts argue that their goal is to teach students to become effective producers *and* consumers of messages. Since the reality is that our students will consume messages created by people who are from different cultures, we would be doing our students a disservice by not introducing them to the methods that may help them make sense out of those messages. Finally, Aristotle said that one must discover the available means of persuasion in any case, thus we commonly tell our students that audience adaptation is the key to creating effective speeches. By introducing students to different strategies and helping them understand why these strategies are used, we are providing them with a broader repertoire of strategies to understand and reach their audiences.

The reader, *Diversity in Public Communication: A Reader*, is a good start toward addressing many of these issues of diversity. It is designed to accompany a more traditional public speaking textbook and assumes that students will learn the Western model as well as these cultural models. The authors present four cultural models of public speaking: women's rhetorical style, African American rhetorical style, Chicano/a rhetorical style and Native American rhetorical style. Our reason for choosing these four models is closely related to the demographics of the United States. We also considered the availability of scholarly articles about these different methods. Some of the minority groups in the United

States have yet to be the subject of research on methods of public speaking. Students are encouraged to look beyond the traditional model of public speaking and to realize there are other equally valid models.

The introduction to the *Reader* explains the importance of understanding diversity and different models of public speaking. It begins with a discussion of the traditional Western model and explains reasons for examining these other cultural models. It also appeals to the students' desire to be successful in the work place:

An understanding of the relationship between culture and public communication styles is essential to your preparation for and success in an increasingly diverse society and workforce. Population projections show the United States is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Also, businesses are forging global relationships which they see as essential to their survival. (Kelly et al. 1994, p. vii)

Thus, understanding cultural diversity becomes a practical concern for the students, and they are encouraged to view this knowledge as valuable to their future success.

Each section of the *Reader* begins with two or three articles describing a particular rhetorical style. Each section also includes sample speeches. Following these materials are discussion questions for each of the articles and speeches. The final part of each section provides suggested activities as teaching tools in class.

For example, the second section of the reader discusses African-American rhetoric. The first article, "The Need to Be: The Socio-Cultural Significance of Black Language" (Weber, 1994) discusses the origins of black language and the importance of language to African-American culture and then describes some of the ways African-Americans use language. According to Weber, to be a spokesperson for the black community the speaker must be articulate and eloquent and

be able to inspire the audience to participate in the delivery of ideas. A speech to an African-American audience would be considered a failure if the audience sat quietly, while a speaker trained in the traditional Western model would expect the audience to sit quietly. The second article, "A Paradigm for Classical African Orature" (Knowles-Borishade, 1991), explains that while the Western tradition contains three elements, speaker, speech and audience, the African model of rhetoric contains five elements: caller-plus-chorus, spiritual entities, nommo, responders and spiritual harmony. She defines each term and explains its significance to understanding African rhetoric. Knowles-Borishade (1991) discusses the importance of morality of the speaker and his or her message and how African-Americans use a humanistic approach to evaluate morality, whereas "traditional Western notions of morality are grounded in the supernaturalist belief that it is God, speaking through holy scriptures, who determines what is moral and what is good" (p. 493).

The last theoretical piece is "Malcolm X and the Limits of the Rhetoric of Revolutionary Dissent" (Condit and Lucaites, 1993). This article defines the rhetoric of dissent and uses that model to analyze the rhetoric of Malcolm X. Condit and Lucaites (1993) argue that Malcolm X used rhetoric to create a peaceful revolution with the goal of creating space in America for African-American voices. These theoretical articles provide a model for African-American rhetoric and help students understand the different ways African-Americans and whites use language. Then students are asked to use that model to analyze "The Ballot or the Bullet" by Malcolm X (1964) and "Common Ground and Common Sense" by Jesse Jackson (1989). They can also look back to the section on women's rhetoric to re-examine speeches by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. These data help both instructor and student better appreciate cultural differences in other's communication. The instructor can better assess the speeches of students with differing cultural backgrounds.

Although each section stands alone, there are overlaps so students can see how cultural models might be combined. For example, there are four speeches by women from the cultural groups discussed in the reader. The women's rhetoric section includes two speeches by African American women, the Chicano section includes one speech given by a woman and a final speech by a woman is in the Native American section. There are also similarities in the cultural models presented. In the introduction to the *Reader* students' attention is directed to some of these overlapping strategies. The discussion questions also ask students to compare and contrast the cultural models with the Western model and each other, and in lectures one can highlight these similarities for students. Ideally this will encourage students to see that many speakers use a hybrid approach to public speaking and may lead them to consider using some of the strategies presented in the reader in their own speeches.

Many of the speeches in the *Reader* are widely available on videotape and instructors can show parts of the speech that best illustrate the model the speaker is using.

In addition to the *Reader*, we are testing different ways to incorporate a diverse perspective into at least three assignments in the public speaking classroom. We begin the term with our first new speech assignment, the cultural identity/heritage speech. This assignment is based on the method one educator, Etta Ruth Hollins, uses to train new teachers to be more culturally sensitive. Hollins developed a writing project for her students that asked them to consider their cultural heritage. Her goal was to help them get beyond the "myth of a monolithic white American culture" (Hollins, 1990, p. 203) We have adapted the project into a speech assignment that asks students to consider their cultural identity/heritage and what impact that might have on them as a public speaker. The students have to interview someone in their family who knows their cultural heritage, then give a speech based on what they learn. In the conclusion they explain how they

think understanding their culture, and that of their classmates, might help them as a producer and consumer of public communication.

This assignment is eye-opening for our students, since most of them are white and tend to see themselves as having no culture. We discourage students from saying they have no heritage because they are "just white." When students say that, we speak to them about what culture means in a broader sense than they are used to. For example, Maine has a very distinct culture, so we encourage them to explore what it means to them and their family to be Mainers.

This assignment encourages students to consider their own culture and how it affects their communication. The preliminary feedback is positive. Although many students said at first they thought the assignment was "stupid" and a "waste of time," once they started working on it, they said they enjoyed it and learned from it. I heard similar reports from the teaching assistants about their experience with the assignment.

The second assignment that incorporates a diverse perspective is the group discussion. The goal was to get students to use collaborative discussion techniques. The work of Kristen Langellier (1989) and others shows that women tend to use collaborative techniques in their discussions, and the purpose of the assignment was to give women an opportunity to use those skills and to introduce men to a feminine perspective on discussion techniques. This discussion format can give students an opportunity to present the different perspectives on public speaking from the reader to their fellow classmates. Each group is responsible for choosing a speech from the reader or from another source that fits the cultural model they have been assigned. Their task is to apply the characteristics of the cultural model as presented in the reader to the speech they have chosen. They are also encouraged to make comparisons between the cultural model and the Western model and to consider how these models impact

our understanding of the speech. For example, one group of students in my class analyzed the "feminine" and the traditional Western aspects of Ronald Reagan's eulogy to the Challenger astronauts and explained why the more personal and interactive style characterized as the "feminine style" was necessary and appropriate to the situation. Through this assignment we hope students will begin to identify the strategies used by different cultural groups and see the weaknesses of using just one model to analyze all public communication events.

The third assignment is the final speech in the course, a special occasion speech. Nero (1990) argues that current public speaking pedagogy places persuasive speaking at the top of a hierarchy and by doing so ignores the epideictic speaking style that many minority students experience in their own communities. This assignment is designed to allow students to express themselves in a way that is consistent with their cultural identity/ heritage.

Our *Reader* includes these activities and others to help those who seek to teach diverse styles of communication. This includes graduate teaching assistants who need direction as they begin teaching the basic public speaking course, especially to prepare these new teachers to address the resistance they might face from their students. We hope that explicitly addressing the importance of being well versed in multicultural issues and our goals for each section will mitigate potential problems.

REFERENCES

- Condit, C. & Lucaites, J. L. (1993). Malcolm X and the limits of revolutionary dissent. *Journal of Black Studies*, 23 (3), 291-313.

- Gregory, H. (1993) *Public speaking for college and career* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Gronbeck, B. McKerrow, R. E., Ehninger, D. & Monroe, A. (1990). *Principles and types of speech communication* (11th ed.). Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman/Little Brown.
- Hanna, M., & Gibson, J. (1989) *Public speaking for personal success* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown.
- Hollins, E. R. (1990). Debunking the myth of a monolithic white American culture; or, moving towards cultural inclusion. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 34 (2), 201-209.
- Jackson J., (1989). Common ground and common sense. *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 54 (21), 649-653.
- Kelly, C., Laffoon, A. E., McKerrow, R. E. (Eds.) (1994). *Diversity in public communication: A reader*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.
- Knowles-Borishade, A. F. (1991). Paradigm for classical African orature: Instrument for a scientific revolution? *Journal of Black Studies*, 21, (4), 499-500.
- Langellier, K.M. (1989). Perspectives on theory and research. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 9, 243-276.
- Nero, C. (1990). *Getting past the myth of race, class and gender neutrality in the public speaking classroom*. Unpublished Manuscript.
- Osborn M., & Osborn, S. (1994). *Public Speaking*. (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Verderber, R. (1988) *The challenge of effective speaking*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Weber S. N., (1994). The need to be: The socio-cultural significance of black language. In L. Samovar & R. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural Communication a Reader* (7th ed., pp. 220-225). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

X, Malcolm, (1965). The ballot or the bullet. In Breitman, E. (Ed.), *Malcolm X speaks* (pp. 23-44). New York: Grove.