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The Speech of Diversity: A Tool to Integrate Cultural Diversity Into the Basic Course*

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The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (1991) documented the demographics of the changing university population and supported the earlier findings of the American Council on Education's study that within the next fifteen years, one-third of the nation will be people of color. As representatives of these diverse groups enter higher education, institutions will be forced to transform their curricula to address and meet the needs of this growing constituency. As Garr (1992) suggested: "The question is no longer *whether* students should learn about diverse cultures, but *how*" (p. 31). Cultural diversity is "one of the largest, most urgent challenges facing higher education today. It is also one of the most difficult challenges colleges have ever faced" (Levin, 1991, p. 4). This paper addresses cultural diversity as it relates to communication using a series of five questions as a framework for discussion. We offer specific suggestions on integrating cultural diversity into speaking assignments in the basic course later in the paper.

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WHAT IS CULTURAL DIVERSITY AS IT RELATES TO COMMUNICATION?

At present, scholars in the field do not agree about what should be included in the definition of cultural diversity. Some believe it should take an international focus, suggesting that cultural diversity ought to address broad differences related to race and ethnicity in the global context. The American Council on Education's Minority Affairs Office suggests that cultural diversity in America should focus on African Americans, Native American Indians, Latino/Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans (1993). Others suggest that cultural diversity ought to be more broadly defined, including groups such as the elderly, Gay/Lesbian/Transsexual/Transgender people, and individuals with what are labeled as disabilities (Griessman, 1993, pp. 1-6). We ground this paper in cultural diversity broadly defined; including differences arising out of issues of ability/disability, age, ethnicity, gender, race, regional difference, sexual orientation, or world view, among others.

This broad definition of cultural diversity makes its relationship with communication compelling. The various communication models developed and explained by countless scholars reflect the speaker and listener linked in a dynamic process. When the speaker creates a message, all of the experiences and knowledge she or he brings to the communication situation act as a reflection of her/his cultural perspective. Similarly, the demographics and world view of the listener(s) serve to mediate the perceived effectiveness of the speaker and listener(s) creating shared meaning. Most speech communication teachers espouse the importance of audience analysis and adaptation from the speaker's perspective, audience analysis and adaptation from the listener's perspective has not received equitable consideration in the communication journals or textbooks. There has been little attempt to

understand the process of a speaker's adaptation from the listener's point of view. A simple question to ask would be: *How well did the speaker adapt to your interests and/or knowledge in her or his speech?* Hence, we advocate the need for basic course instructors/scholars to reconsider audience analysis as it addresses cultural diversity from speakers and listeners jointly engaged in a communication transaction.

WHAT APPROACHES COULD BE ADOPTED AS CULTURAL DIVERSITY BECOMES MORE CENTRAL IN THE BASIC COURSE?

We offer two methods as starting points. The first, and perhaps easiest, plan is to use the basic course classroom to raise awareness about cultural diversity. This involves the transmission of information about cultural diversity. The basic course on many campuses is required of all students (Trank and Lewis, 1991). As such, students can increase their knowledge by preparing individually their own speeches about cultural diversity; as well as by listening to the presentations of their classmates. To some extent, a speech on cultural diversity can be used as a diagnostic tool in the assessment of student learning in general education. The impact of these curriculum changes related to the infusion of diversity into the basic course can be understood better by examining the topic selection and level of understanding demonstrated by students in the basic course.

The second approach we offer is actually an implicit result arising from the first. It involves the identification and development of skills related to communication with diverse peoples. Cognitive differences related to the analytical development of messages, the preparation of speech materials, and the verbal and nonverbal differences arising as a result of cultural diversity provide students with the tools needed to

communicate in a variety of contexts, particularly those associated with public communication.

Gordon (1992) provided some of the potential results to be gained through the introduction of cultural diversity issues to the curriculum. These may include learning to respect each other, liking each other, minimizing racism and sexism, and improving interpersonal relations. The goal is to "create a climate where everyone can contribute. . . ." (p. 24). Although it may be difficult to measure, students who are exposed to issues of diversity in the basic course classroom may also begin to respect issues of diversity as different rather than as better or worse.

The use of an expository speech on some aspect of cultural diversity can provide knowledge for students who might not otherwise be introduced to such information. As Rowe (1989) offered: "What is required is if people will personally do at least one thing each year to 'make a difference'" (p. 377). The basic course experience can be a meaningful opportunity for the introduction of such an annual effort for instructors seeking to meet the challenges of a increasingly diverse student population.

WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATUS OF DIVERSITY IN BASIC COURSE TEXTBOOKS?

A preliminary review of current basic course textbooks suggests a lack of attention to issues of cultural diversity. Some textbooks deal with diversity in the audience analysis and adaptation section. A few of the more recent textbooks have addressed the topic area, but have not viewed seriously their role in the areas of knowledge-building and skills development suggested earlier (Brydon & Scott, 1994; Gamble & Gamble, 1994). Another gap in the basic course textbooks is attention to culturally sensitive evaluation. When students

from diverse cultures present speeches on topics considered culturally diverse, they tend to be evaluated on the basis of traditional Western public speakers, with little attention to the cultural norms of their own particular cultures. Recent publications do attempt to meet the challenge of posing alternative frameworks for organizing ideas (Foss and Foss, 1994; Jaffee, 1995; Kearney & Plax, 1995). Certainly, it is encouraging to see that such models are being developed, however, the methods for evaluating speeches using these alternative frameworks remain ambiguous. Thus, we offer the "speech of information and diversity" assignment which focuses on cultural diversity in terms of content. With this assignment, instructors may continue to use traditional evaluation criteria while students enrich their understanding of cultures other than their own. Ideally (and perhaps eventually), the assignment could be modified to also require students to move beyond their comfort zones in terms of structure and delivery style as well as content. Until evaluation criteria are developed, however, the "speech of information and diversity" seems to be a viable option for basic course instructors choosing to incorporate cultural diversity into their course.

HOW WELL DO INSTRUCTORS ACCEPT CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE BASIC COURSE?

Generally, those instructors who resist the introduction of cultural diversity in the basic course lack a clear understanding of what cultural diversity means and how it can be integrated into the basic course to benefit the students' training. As a result, they focus on the demographic characteristics that are most familiar to them: age, sex, education level, economic status, and other accepted categories. Some resist the introduction of cultural diversity on the grounds that it has the potential to force students to talk about topics that

might be unfamiliar to them. Others disagree about whether cultural diversity speech assignments should be informative or persuasive in nature. Faculty development focusing on knowledge and skills acquisition, coupled with a clear explanation about what outcomes are being sought by having the students speak about diversity, can mitigate these concerns.

Most instructors' frustration seems to result from lack of guidance from textbooks and instructors' manuals. Comments offered by instructors at a mid-sized midwestern university after completing a diversity speech pilot test ranged from "perhaps there should be more discussion of what constitutes a culture," to "this was difficult . . . The book doesn't really give us examples of intercultural or multicultural speeches."

Rather than avoiding the topic of cultural diversity in the basic course, textbooks should be expanded to include discussion of the topic and professional development opportunities, for basic course instructors. For example, those faculty who have had intercultural experiences, either in America or abroad; or who have had course work or experience in areas of intercultural communication or cultural diversity, could be called upon to lead other faculty in development sessions focused toward incorporating cultural diversity issues and assignments into the basic course. In addition, instructional development materials focused on incorporating cultural diversity could be provided with basic course textbook packages. Finally, short courses as well as pre-conference seminars could be offered at national and regional meetings to enrich instructors' knowledge about cultural diversity and the basic communication course.

HOW MIGHT ONE INCORPORATE CULTURAL DIVERSITY INTO THE BASIC COURSE CLASSROOM AS A PUBLIC SPEAKING ASSIGNMENT?

One means by which to address this concern in the basic course is to require students to prepare and perform an informative speech of diversity. While discussing cultural diversity during course lectures is helpful, students learn more readily when they are afforded the opportunity to apply theoretical concepts directly (Greene, 1988). Obviously, before an instructor can expect students to prepare such speeches, some reading and class discussion must take place around the issue. What follows is an assignment description for an informative speech of cultural diversity. Next, steps to help students brainstorm and organize an informative speech of cultural diversity are detailed.

INFORMATIVE SPEECH ON DIVERSITY

Students are asked to write and present a four to six-minute informative speech according to traditional Western standards. They are required to step beyond their comfort zones, however, with regard to content focused on some aspect of cultural diversity. They may prepare a speech of demonstration, description, definition, or exposition. Beyond these general topic requirements, the specific purpose must be geared toward some multicultural perspective. The speech may highlight differences arising out of issues such as ability/disability, age, ethnicity, gender, race, regional difference, sexual orientation, world view, and so forth. Students may elect to organize their speeches using any of the following designs: analogy, comparison, or contrast. Finally, students must consider a cultural perspective which, somehow,

conflicts with their own cultural belief system. Students can use a comparative design in which one perspective is that of their own culture or subculture. However, the comparative design also encourages students to stretch beyond those perspectives which are most familiar and comfortable to them.

The range of speech topics is endless. Students may elect to compare the holiday traditions of two ethnic groups. They may choose to consider several nonverbal signals and their different meanings in various cultures. Students may consider the advantages and disadvantages of employing older Americans in the workplace. They may highlight the conflicting cultural perceptions about traditional and working mothers and fathers. Perhaps, they will consider the positive and negative stereotypes dominant American society holds about witches. Another popular topic might be the religious ceremonies or customs of Native Americans. Some students have compared marital rights and responsibilities among various cultures; others discussed cultural groups in America as diverse as Asian Americans, Gays, and the Ku Klux Klan; while other students focused on religious groups in America such as the Amish, Christian Scientists, and cults.

Students often identified various activities and looked at how different cultures approached them. Some examples included sports in the inner-city culture, interracial dating, and teen suicide. Some topics were focused on women or gender issues. Sometimes an object person representing a particular culture was discussed (i.e., Sergeant Dwight Johnson and the Statue of Liberty). Medical issues, such as alcoholism and drug use by people of different cultures, were also identified as topics. The "speech of information and diversity" lends itself to a wide array of topics within the parameters of cultural diversity.

The assignment appears to encourage a wide array of cultural diversity topics. By requiring a comparative organizational design, students speak about a perspective with

which they are familiar, as well as moving beyond that familiar perspective to consider another world view.

BRAINSTORMING AND ORGANIZING THE DIVERSITY SPEECH

It is important to allow both sufficient time for brainstorming ideas and adequate guidance in terms of narrowing the focus. The following brainstorming guide is one means by which to address these concerns.

First, ask students to generate a list of (sub)cultures. These can be groups within the United States or beyond. Once the list has been generated, ask students to brainstorm another list subdivided into the following categories: (a) objects, (b) processes, (c) concepts, and (d) events. At this point, ask students to connect two items (one from each list) by explaining *what* as well as *why* they are related. For example, students may ask why the group engages in a particular custom, or believe this way or that, and so forth. The goal is to help students learn to discover the meaning behind the actions, beliefs, or customs of a (sub)culture which is not their own.

Once students have achieved successfully this narrowing process, the instructor may ask them to compare or contrast their topic with that of another (sub)culture. As Table 1 illustrates, three options seem most apparent. (1) Students may compare or contrast two different (sub)cultures, neither being one to which they belong. (2) Or, students may compare or contrast one (sub)culture with that of the dominant American culture. (3) Finally, students may compare or contrast one (sub)culture with a particular (sub)culture to which they do belong. Regardless of whether students talk about their own cultural perspectives, they may ultimately also move beyond those perspectives into some cultural perspective which is diverse for them. As Table 1 depicts, by

shaping questions around these three ideas, more effective and less effective approaches are revealed to students.

Table 1
Comparative Frameworks for the
Speech of Information and Diversity

Central Question:	How do Jewish Americans Celebrate Yom Kippur?
Option 1:	How do Jewish Americans celebrate Yom Kippur as compared to Jewish Israelis?
Option 2:	How do Jewish Americans celebrate Yom Kippur as compared to the dominant American culture?
Option 3:	How do Jewish Americans celebrate Yom Kippur as compared to Christian Americans' celebration of a similar holiday?

CONCLUSION

If cultural diversity is to be taught effectively in the basic course, then textbooks, instructional materials, professional development opportunities, and evaluation criteria must be developed and made available to basic course instructors. One approach for incorporating cultural diversity into the basic course is the "speech of information and diversity." This assignment may be useful to instructors because it deviates from traditional public speaking assignments only in terms of

content (not structure or delivery style). Thus, existing evaluation forms could continue to be used to grade students' presentations. Ideally, this assignment could be modified to require alternative methods of organization and delivery, as well. However, until such evaluation standards are created, this assignment may, indeed, be a useful and workable approach for basic course instructors attempting to integrate cultural diversity into their courses.

The changing demographics of our college campuses compel speech communication educators to further examine their instructional approaches. We believe that sharing a variety of approaches designed to integrate diversity is a vital step in the search for effective diversity strategies. The basic public speaking classroom is an ideal place to begin or continue the dialogue about cultural diversity. This essay poses but one possible approach for consideration as instructors continue down the educational journey toward incorporating effectively cultural diversity into the basic course.

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