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Meeting the Challenge of Cultural Diversity: Ideas and Issues for the Public Speaking Course

Kimberly A. Powell

Cultural diversity has become a central concern at most levels of education. The term itself has become so accepted and commonplace that we often do not stop to ask what cultural diversity means for our respective fields. R. Roosevelt Thomas Jr., president of the American Institute for Managing Diversity at Morehouse College in Atlanta, defines diversity as building "systems and a culture that unite different people in a common pursuit without undermining their diversity. It's taking differences into account while developing a cohesive whole" (Gordon, 1992, p. 23). This seems a fruitful way to view cultural diversity in communication education. "Our challenge is not only to *accommodate* diversity, but to actually *use* it to bring new and richer perspectives to...our whole social climate" (Winikow, 1990, p. 242). The public speaking dimension of the basic communication course could better meet the challenge of cultural diversity by addressing training of graduate assistants, course content, and public speaking assessment.

Given the patriarchal traditions of rhetoric, it is no wonder that our courses often teach students that there is but one correct way to communicate. For example, many basic course texts stress that effective speech delivery "combines a certain degree of formality with the best attributes of good conversation. . ." (Lucas, 1986, p. 226); and organization relies upon "five organizational patterns: (1) chronological, (2)

topical, (3) spatial, (4) causal, and (5) problem-solution" (Beebe & Beebe, 1994, p. 171). A survey of basic course texts on public speaking shows that the Western tradition of linear organization, formal yet conversational delivery, and well documented content are the focus of our courses (Beebe & Beebe, 1994; Gamble & Gamble, 1994; Lucas, 1986; Osborn & Osborn, 1994). While there is nothing inherently wrong with this tradition, teaching from it exclusively does not allow for the variety of communication styles in this age of diversity. Even as our texts discuss diversity, the focus is on adapting to audiences, rather than on loosening requirements to include alternative styles of speaking. The Western tradition remains entrenched through the training of teachers of communication.

Through five years as a basic course graduate teaching assistant, I was trained partially through observing student speeches to teach according to traditional norms. One supervisor defined bad public speeches as those that use too much emotion, tell stories, and use over-flowery language. He then showed us a tape of an African American student speech. This speech was quite effective judging by audience response and intuition — yet we were instructed to give such a speech a low grade. Thus, we were instructed to penalize a student for giving an audience effective speech that grew out of his cultural communication style. This is not to say that every audience-pleasing speech should be given high marks. However, grading criteria should allow styles outside the Eurocentric norm. Training graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to recognize a variety of speech styles may aid in the incorporation and valuing of cultural diversity in the basic course.

In addition to including diversity issues in GTA training, there are other ways to meet the challenge of cultural diversity in the basic course. First, when viewing sample speakers in the course it is important to view speakers of different cultures. Traditionally,

Subject matters and approaches have been only slightly altered, perhaps with the inclusion of ... a speech by Martin Luther King ... these approaches leave unchanged the dominant notions of what should be taught. They leave the study of new perspectives and material on the fringes and keep at the center of the curriculum what traditionally has been considered essential and important to learn. (Smith, 1991, p. 132)

Sample speeches need to equally represent a diversity of speakers. Students need to understand that there are other African-American speakers in addition to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Using speeches of Malcolm X, Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, Henry Cisneros, and others representative of a variety of cultures (see Defrancisco & Jensen, 1994) shows that there are different speaking styles and effective speakers in all cultures. Viewing these speeches leads to a discussion of language use and style, different organizational patterns, and varying delivery styles.

Second, we can incorporate assignments into our public speaking courses which enhance student understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures. Students can choose a culture and interview someone from that culture, investigate nonverbal differences, communication styles, food and clothing differences, gender roles, among other dimensions, so the culture is no longer strange to them, but interesting. Students are made aware of the possibility that their interviewee is *not* totally representative of the culture; and to be careful not to perpetuate cultural stereotypes. The class is not only exposed to a variety of cultures and communication styles, but interaction between the students increases. A large international student population helps to bridge gaps as the American and international students interact for this assignment, and continue beyond (Powell, 1996).

We need to go beyond content to consider loosening the traditional public speaking requirements, discussed above.

Allowing students to speak from their own traditions will be liberating for the students and enriching for the class, which will be exposed to and learn to listen to a variety of communication styles and modes. For example, after hearing a speech from an African-American oratorical tradition, one white-American student approached me saying he couldn't understand anything that was said. To me, the speech was understandable, but different. By the end of the course, the students had allowed themselves to listen and be drawn into this emotion-filled style of speaking. The speeches were still composed of elements of traditional explanations of organization and effective language use, but were less rigid. We can loosen rigid requirements for speeches allowing more of a range of expression within the categories of effective public speaking. As Osborn & Osborn (1994) state, "... the public speaking class provides an ideal laboratory to explore and discover the different cultures that make up America. Students learn to tolerate and respect the many voices that make up what Lincoln once described as 'the chorus of the Union'" (p. xvii).

Cultural diversity in the basic communication course "opens up a myriad of possibilities and an education in itself. It can be frightening, frustrating, or even painful at first. It can also be exciting, enriching, and affirming" (Ellis, 1991, p. 214). According to the United States Census Bureau, by the turn of the century, Hispanics will become the largest minority group in the United States, followed by African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Native Americans (Gamble & Gamble, 1994, p. 19). The reality of a diverse society means, "Those of us who can study, work, and live with people from other cultures and races can enjoy more success in school, on the job, and in our neighborhoods" (Ellis, 1991, p. 214). By helping instructors understand that differences in cultural communication styles are not superior or inferior and incorporating examples and assignments that emphasize the richness of culture, not only will our courses be more interesting, but our

students will be better prepared to succeed in a diverse society.

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