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Common Sense in the Basic Public Speaking Course

Calvin L. Troup

The foundation of the basic public speaking course is not widely questioned today. As a public speaking course director, I have become well acquainted with sales representatives from many publishers. All of them want me to switch to their text for the coming semester, except for one. I routinely tell the representatives that any of the top ten public speaking textbook authors could probably teach an excellent version of the course from any of the top ten public speaking texts on the market. The shared foundation is so secure, and the emphases that distinguish these texts are so slight, that good teachers can comfortably employ any of them. Of course, we each select our texts based on their particular merits for our own versions of the course. But, as William Norwood Brigance said, "For twenty-three centuries, effective speeches have been prepared in accordance with a theory of public address," adding that "even the slow-minded have had time to catch on" (7). In the 50 years since Brigance's statement in *Speech: Its Techniques and Disciplines in a Free Society*, the field seems to have maintained a consensus on the theoretical foundations for teaching public speaking.

In fact, I am concerned that we now take the foundations so much for granted that we may neglect effectively teaching them. We may be omitting the compel-

ling connections between training for ordinary citizens in the art of public speaking and the vitality of a democratic republic. In that sense, I will argue that our current situation demands that we *recover the foundation of public speaking for our students*.

Much ink has been devoted to the perceived demise of the public forum, both in popular and scholarly literature. As James Darsey has noted, a broad spectrum of scholars and popular pundits who make it their business to disagree with one another have long since reached consensus on the decline in the condition public dialogue and debate (ix-x). The public speaking course would appear to be a prime site for equipping our students to do the practical work of rehabilitating the public square in America.

Recent editions of public speaking texts do address certain relevant aspects of contemporary public discourse for students. Authors devote serious attention to the diversification of American audiences via immigration and the implications of globalization through international travel and communication technologies. But these same public speaking texts seem only to gesture toward basic issues concerning rhetoric, citizenship, and democracy enacted through active public dialogue. The texts seem to assume that students today possess the historical and cultural knowledge to understand the significance of their participation in public discourse.

I cannot take the time to document fully what I consider an unintended consequence of the general form to which the most widely used texts in the field adhere. But the texts do point to the lack of connection between students and the foundations of public speaking in the basic course. One popular text seems to be silent on the

connection of public speaking to citizenship and democracy (Lucas). Three others devote a few paragraphs each to the citizenship and democracy connection (Andrews 4-5; Beebe 11-12; Osborn 8-9). Another includes a ten-page segment of the first chapter (Sproule 11-21), and the text we are using at Duquesne includes a brief mention, but devotes a more extended appendix on citizenship and rhetoric in the public forum (Zarefsky 5-6, 409-418).

So, we articulate clearly the general need for inclusion of disenfranchised voices into American society, but “as citizens in a democratic republic” remains largely unstated. Whether due to ignorance, inexperience, or apathy, I suggest that many of our students cannot provide our unstated premise. Therefore, students are prone to think of public speaking as a knack or a craft to gain personal advantage, or they infer some psychological, self-help foundation, as in, “I gained so much self-confidence by learning to speak in front of people!” Too many leave the course lacking theoretical depth and historical connections.

THE POWER OF RHETORICAL DIALOGUE IN DEMOCRACY

Therefore, we need to acquaint students with our deeply held assumptions about public speaking in a democratic society. In short, we need to lead them to the tree of democracy. In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine invokes this metaphor that was well worn even in his own day, more than 225 years ago. Speaking of a fledgling society of immigrants in a sprawling wilderness he says,

"Some convenient tree will afford them a state-house, under the branches of which the whole colony may assemble to deliberate on public matters"(3). The metaphorical tree of democracy points to the power and necessity of rhetoric for that dialogue that we call deliberation in the public forum. Where public speaking is concerned, I am convinced that the historical and theoretical foundations of rhetorical culture are radical and subversive in a most hopeful sense, especially for people living in an age and culture where hope sometimes eludes them entirely.

As Rod Hart once suggested, we need to own the fact that education, especially communication education, is a positively subversive act. "Teachers are insurgents, liberators, restoring in others the freedom to reason, releasing them from the tyrannies of conventional wisdom, conventional morality, conventional television" (100). Hart was speaking of communication education in general. But public speaking teachers, who annually reach a huge segment of the American collegiate population, possess great potential to motivate and equip students to become more fully functional citizens in a public forum.

Our tree of democracy has deep historical roots in the field. As Martin J. Medhurst reminds us, basic training in the rhetorical arts grounds our disciplinary heritage:

To be able to articulate a point of view, defend a proposition, attack an evil, or celebrate a set of common values was seen as one of the central ways in which the people retained their freedoms and shaped their society. Training in public speaking or public address was thus understood to be preparation for citizenship in a democratic Republic. It was this sense of the term

that motivated the founding, in 1914, of a new scholarly organization called The National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. (xi)

The connection between public speaking, citizenship, and democracy was once commonplace in our textbooks, rooted in ancient soil. In *Fundamentals of Public Speaking*, Donald C. Bryant and Karl P. Wallace state two assumptions that "men of good will in a democratic society have always known" (9). The assumptions come directly from the Greek *polis*: "First...that democracy will not work unless there is a general communication among men—a constant and effective interchange of both information and opinion," and "Second...that if communication is widespread and *free*, knowledge will prevail over ignorance, and truth over falsehood" (9-10).

Indeed, the intellectual genealogy of these assumptions is clear from Isocrates and Aristotle through the founding discourse of the United States to mid-twentieth century public speaking texts. And professors like Bryant, Wallace, and Brigrance framed the rationale for advancing such assumptions in the wake of the two world wars that rocked the first half of their century. They viewed the role of public speaking in the college curriculum as vital to the distinction between democracy and tyranny (Bryant & Wallace 10). Introducing his text first published in 1952, Brigrance stated the premise on which a public speaking course should be taught this way:

The system of speechmaking was born of man's early struggle for democracy. It is still inherent in a free society, and unless an adequate portion of leaders in all areas of human life can speak intelligently, effectively, and responsibly—among themselves and

to the people at large — we must live in constant danger of internal breakdown. (7)

So, against the backdrop of history and political philosophy, this essay also participates in the sense of public speaking education as a deeply American phenomenon and in the tradition of worrying over its demise. Robert T. Oliver's voice resonates with the Americana theme in public speaking:

Whatever else has happened in our history, the democratization of society has steadily advanced. And one reason is that when once the principle is admitted that issues affecting the public may be publicly discussed, the compass of the discussion always expands and never contracts.

It is not without significance that in these United States public speaking has flourished as it has nowhere else.... We as a people have developed orators, have valued oratory as an art, and have listened and talked back to multitudes of speakers far more than has any other portion of the globe. (xviii)

Some may be too humble, others too cynical to affirm Oliver's statement. But I think we still believe that, ultimately, a decline in the health of the public forum means the loss of freedom — not freedom to make choices about personal preferences or consumer freedom, but basic human freedom. I hope that we still believe, also ultimately, that rhetoric is not violence (as has been recently suggested by some) but one of the best alternatives to violence known to human society.

The baseline commitment to a real connection between the art of public speaking and free democratic societies makes the quality of the basic public speaking course a recurring worry. Isocrates worries about the implications for Athens when his students neglect their

public speaking lessons and instead are "wasting their youth in drinking bouts, in parties, in soft living and childish folly" not to mention drinking to excess, gambling and "hanging about the training schools of the flute girls" (53). Brigrance simply worries that "we don't have enough competent speakers to carry on the everyday business of living together in a democracy" (5).

Therefore, taking our students to the tree of democracy means explicating the aforementioned assumptions for our students and substantially integrating the assumptions into our public speaking courses. Of course, the tree of democracy to which we must lead our students has become less tangible and more metaphorical in today's society than ever before. As teachers, we first need to help our students to locate the tree. As Zarefsky notes, "Today, the public forum is not an actual place to which we go; instead it is an imagined 'space' that exists wherever people have the freedom to exchange ideas"(410). But we cannot afford for them to lose the basic, foundational idea of public, rhetorical dialogue in a forum where members of society come together to make reasonable decisions about their societal life together.

THE TEMPTATION TO TEACH TECHNIQUE

To reintroduce a theoretical and historical foundation into the basic public speaking course at any depth is a major project. At two universities, I have been involved in directing moves toward making the public speaking course more intellectually demanding and theoretically rich. Students do not realize that they

want this approach to public speaking. Most imagine that a public speaking course at its best allows them to speak many times with much encouragement, volumes of constructive criticism, and grading based on effort instead of performance. But student pressure rarely tempts us to omit the foundations of the course and reduce it to techniques. Rather, institutional issues and student complacency about the public sphere are more likely culprits.

Institutional Issues

A number of conditions under which most public speaking courses are taught today may inhibit the introduction of more substantial theoretical and historical material. A few of the most prominent include:

Class Size. Most public speaking classes enroll 20-25 students, some schools allow even slightly higher caps. The performance components of the course intensify time pressure on instruction. The larger the class, the less time an instructor can devote to relevant historical and theoretical material.

Student Expectations. Many students expect public speaking to be an easy course and benign intellectually. Especially in cases where public speaking is a "service" course, other departments often view the course as a simple, skill-driven course.

Instructor Preparation. Teaching assistants with a limited background in the field often teach the course. In many cases, the teachers have not yet been taught the foundations of the course themselves. Combined with justifiable concerns about teaching and grading the

performance aspects of the course, teaching assistants may find it difficult to incorporate meaningful connections to citizenship and democracy on their own.

Immediate Rewards of Skill Instruction. Public speaking can be a rewarding course to teach, if only because the instructor can actually witness the development of students' performance and confidence as the term proceeds. But the rewards that manifest themselves most immediately and most clearly pertain to practice, not foundations.

Student Complacency

What is often considered the political apathy of traditional college-age students has been so well documented over the past 20 years that I will not revisit it here in any depth. However, I should note that in "Attitudes Toward Politics and Public Service: A National Survey of College and University Undergraduates," the *Harvard Political Review* confirms that the turn of the millennium appears to have made little impact on the attitudes of 21st Century college students. Levels of political activity and trust in government institutions are low; students are "disillusioned about and disconnected from the political system" and are looking for alternatives to politics as solutions to community and society's problems.

The Harvard study confirms what have now become conventional concerns about the shape of public life in America. In *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, Francis Fukuyama synthesizes many of the related issues for college-aged

people that appear in the Harvard study, such as high levels of local community involvement with contrasting lows in traditional political activity.

Fukuyama also identifies the emergence of a kind of absolute tolerance principal in middle-class American culture — a principal that many public speaking teachers may have encountered in class: "Most middle-class Americans don't believe in anything strongly enough to want to impose their values on one another" (89). In fact, Fukuyama says that while middle-class Americans do have convictions, ethics, and moral positions, "they are even more committed to being non-judgmental about the values of other people" (90). Therefore, rather than being simply complacent about public speaking, students may be reflecting larger cultural shifts that translate into a predisposition against the kind of public advocacy traditionally associated with public speaking.

In simple terms, institutional pressures and cultural changes seem to be making the trip to the tree of democracy more demanding than it might have been in previous generations. Teachers need to provide a more substantial intellectual, political, and cultural framework to support the trip. But this pedagogical work also seems more necessary.

Perhaps my expectations exceed what any of us can humanely deliver in a typical semester. Nevertheless, I cannot easily shake my desire for students to understand public speaking as more than a self-help project dressed up in academic garb. Public speaking is one of the crucial remaining sites for rhetoric in its most basic sense to be grounded in the hearts and minds of college

students in a way that can benefit the commonwealth of humanity.

THE WISDOM OF COMMON SENSES

I am now prepared to suggest an antidote to the temptation of reducing the basic public speaking course to technique. To apply the antidote, we must lead students to the tree of democracy all semester long. One way to exercise such leadership may be to introduce into the course an historical text that both models appropriate and effective public discourse and has also contributed to the framework of the American public forum. I am suggesting specifically that we consider texts foundational to our common sense ideas about what the public forum ought to be.

Common Sense is one example that I will develop more fully in a moment. Other candidates would include *I Have a Dream*, *Federalist #10*, *The Declaration of Independence*, certain Supreme Court decisions and Presidential inaugural addresses, etc. I am not advocating for any one particular text, only that through such texts we can lead students to the tree of democracy and give them some idea of what to do when they get there. Such formative texts combine passion for democratic government with the rhetorical engine of democracy—speech that is not only free, but also reasonable, informed, and constructively critical.

But taking such an approach also may require a return to foundations that would cause a shift in approach from current conventions—at least the conventions I have met through experience and in our basic public

speaking literature (including textbooks). The current conventions invite students into the course as a means of overcoming their fear of public speaking and gaining new skill in self-expression.

I have no interest in overstating this case. I myself have been trained to teach the course in this way and the structure of the basic public speaking course as I teach it has many of the earmarks of our conventional approach. Students still frequently express their positive public speaking experience with me in terms of enhanced self-confidence or self-esteem. Students do learn much of value in such courses—organization, audience adaptation, extemporaneous delivery, reasoning, critical thinking, and more. I want them to continue to learn these things, but also to do so in connection with their role as educated citizens in a democratic republic—one in which the voices of citizens are sorely needed.

COMMON SENSE IN DUQUESNE PUBLIC SPEAKING

How are we trying to reintroduce the foundational issue of public speaking as a cornerstone of public discourse in a democratic republic and a responsibility for all citizens? I will attempt to outline in brief the assumptions and components of the basic public speaking course at Duquesne University. Then I will explain our current use of *Common Sense*, recognizing that hearing an account of how someone else teaches a course can quickly become as tiresome as hearing awe-stricken parents tell interminable stories about their children.

We want students to own their role as engaged citizens in the American republic and to cultivate their public speaking knowledge and skill to pursue civic virtue as citizens in a democracy. We recognize that the course routinely enhances the self-concept, self-confidence, and self-esteem of students. But we see these effects, desirable as they may be, as byproducts that students should reap from virtuous civic conduct. Our aim to rebuild the basic public speaking course on the foundation of citizen participation in public discourse has emerged from our department's alignment within the strong tradition of liberal and professional education at Duquesne.

In other words, the historical and intellectual traditions of our country, our discipline, and our community provide common rationale for making pursuit of civic virtue prominent in our basic public speaking course—more prominent than pursuit of enhanced self-concept, self-expression, or personal gain. Therefore, although still in process, we are working to enrich the course theoretically and historically.

About four years ago we began to revamp our approach. We selected David Zarefsky's, *Public Speaking: Strategies for Success* as our primary textbook because we wanted one of the more rigorous and rhetorical of the available public speaking texts. Text selection is particularly important because graduate students teach most sections of the course. We set the class limit at 25 students to allow for three major graded speeches and ample in-class response time. Finally, we decided to incorporate Paine's *Common Sense* as a required supplementary text.

The sailing with *Common Sense* has not been entirely smooth. We reconsidered it after the first year's student responses because they seemed to have a hard time making connections. However, we elected to continue with *Common Sense* for three reasons. First, in both purpose and reception the pamphlet was deeply and explicitly rhetorical in its own day. Second, the text possesses enduring historical status as a benchmark for the American Revolution. Third, Paine's work connects quite directly to the better-known texts of the *Declaration of Independence* and *Constitution*. Therefore, *Common Sense* adds significant intellectual value and depth and forwards our purpose of making public speaking a course in which students can learn the history, theory, and practice of enacting civic virtue.

CURRENT USE OF COMMON SENSE

Instead of substituting a different text, we decided to adjust our approach to teaching *Common Sense*, incorporating it more aggressively. Students seem to be engaging the text more actively and making some of the basic connections we anticipated. We have attempted to make *Common Sense* a more integral component of the course through the following methods:

Students must read the text in segments that correspond with the three exams in the course. *Common Sense* passages are used in multiple choice test items as examples for specific conceptual material appearing on the exam. Students who have not read *Common Sense* place themselves at a serious disadvantage on such questions.

As we approach the second and third units of the course (persuasive speeches and speeches of controversy) the text becomes much more directly relevant to the course material. Instructors use examples from *Common Sense* to teach persuasive structures, invention, reasoning, evidence, proofs, refutation, etc.

To conclude the persuasive unit and the unit on controversy, students prepare a think paper in which they find applications of critical and theoretical concepts from class in *Common Sense*. (Copies of the think paper assignments are attached.)

CONCLUSION

The impact of *Common Sense* on student knowledge, experience, and perspective in our basic public speaking course has been modestly successful in the direction we had hoped. Although no formal study has been conducted, a number of instructors have reported similar responses as they have incorporated *Common Sense*. While we can continue to improve the substance and methods for achieving our pedagogical goals, as we have honed and shaped the content and structure of the course to resurrect the foundations of civic virtue, our adjustments have registered in the consciousness of our students. Across a number of sections, we have seen the impact of *Common Sense* in six key areas.

First, *Common Sense* has enriched the substance of the course and raised the conceptual plane at which we teach public speaking. Student comments indicate that they recognize the added substance—they resonate with the fact that public speaking demands knowledge, not

just presentation skills. Second, *Common Sense* has produced a better grasp of argumentation concepts for public speaking purposes. We have seen better understanding of claims, warrants, evidence, etc.

Third, *Common Sense* helps us to introduce the central role of rhetoric in American history, culture, and politics. Students gain insight into the fact that public speaking is entrenched as a significant factor in the collective experience and heritage of all Americans. Fourth, *Common Sense* has illustrated the practical implications of public speaking for society. As students become more familiar with the context of Paine's text, they understand better why they might need to become involved in public discourse. Fifth, gaining contextual bearings has also enabled students to see the previously mentioned connections between *Common Sense*, the *Declaration of Independence*, and the *Constitution*. They can begin to understand that many Americans were thinking and speaking about the same issues. Public discourse becomes a broader, more popular prospect rather than an elite activity.

Finally, *Common Sense* has enhanced instructor credibility. Students consistently resist the initial introduction of the text, but by the end of the semester, many of them report that *Common Sense* has contributed to their learning experience. The integration of the art of public speaking with its implications in society, politics, and history foreground the expertise of the instructor, the intellectual rigor of the field, and the intrinsic personal benefits of the course.

In the future we may choose to conduct a formal study of the pedagogical influence of *Common Sense* in the basic public speaking course. We may also experi-

ment with different texts like those mentioned earlier. However, the pedagogical point is not attached to the specific text selected or a particular method. Our goal is to lead them to understand the enduring relevance of the tree of democracy—the basic assumptions that connect the practical wisdom of public speaking with the virtues of living in a free, democratic republic. Once they come to that tree, we want them to learn the value of their participation and provide the knowledge and skills they need to negotiate a more elusive and technologically sophisticated public space than Thomas Paine ever imagined.

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COMMON SENSE THINK PAPERS

We cherish the right to freedom of speech in the United States. Thomas Paine's pamphlet, *Common Sense*, is one example of how public dialogue played a significant role in the life of our nation. The concepts and skills you are learning in class can be seen at work in this famous document from American history. During each speaking round, you will return to *Common Sense* to explore how Thomas Paine practiced the concepts, strategies, and techniques more than 200 years ago in ways that affect your life every day today.

In each think paper, you should **incorporate the main concepts that we've read and discussed.**

- Each think paper should be approximately 750 words in length.
- Each think paper will be worth 100 points.
- Deduction for late submission: 15 points.

**Think Paper #1: Values and Information
in *Common Sense*.**

1. Write one paragraph that summarizes who Thomas Paine was and why *Common Sense* was such an important and influential document at the time it was written. Refer to at least 2 sources from outside of the book itself and cite them according to MLA or APA style for research papers in a "works cited" list (bibliography) attached to your paper.
2. In your own words, write a one-paragraph synopsis of the overall story that Thomas Paine is trying to tell. Do not exceed 100 words.
3. Outline the book. Each chapter should be a Roman numeral. Main points within the chapter should be assigned a capital letter. Key sub-points should receive an Arabic numeral.
4. List all the sources that Paine identifies plus any that you recognize as outside references, even if Paine takes it for granted that the reader knows the reference.
5. Write a paragraph explaining the values that Paine wants the reader to adopt and live by. Quote specific passages that indicate the values Paine is advocating in *Common Sense*. If you accepted what Paine proposed in the book and you were living at the time of the American Revolution, what actions would you have been willing to take as a result?

**Think Paper #2: Reasoning and Controversy
in *Common Sense*:**

1. Write down three main arguments that you think Paine makes in *Common Sense*. Using Zarefsky's discussion in Chapter 7 on Proof, Support, and Reasoning, write the claim for each in your own words and identify the supporting material that Paine uses for each argument.
2. Using Zarefsky's list of six strategies for reasoning in Chapter 7, rank the types of reasoning Thomas Paine depends upon in *Common Sense*, from most to least. State your reasons for your top ranking, and then give one example from *Common Sense* for each of your top three.
3. In your opinion, what made *Common Sense* such an influential pamphlet, in a time when literally thousands of pamphlets were being published, distributed, and read throughout the colonies?
4. Find an argument of Paine's that you think is still pertinent to your life and our country today. Explain why you say so. Then, diagram and analyze the argument according to the Toulmin model of argument analysis. Where is the argument strongest? Where is it most susceptible to refutation?