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The Public Speaking Classroom as Public Space: Taking Risks and Embracing Difference

Margaret R. LaWare

There have been several books and articles by academics turned teaching philosophers (hooks, 1994; Palmer, 1998; Tompkins, 1996), who talk about the significance of teaching in the direction of building a community in the classroom and ultimately a community in the University at large. While I believe this is a very useful concept, particularly in terms of what can be accomplished in the public speaking classroom, I also feel that the metaphor or concept of the classroom as public space is useful and generative. Ideally, public space can be understood as the place where people from different backgrounds and social locations can meet, talk, argue and confront their differences. Public relationships are something distinct from personal friendships and familial relationships, and as Dewey (1946) and others have pointed out, these relationships are vital to a democracy. Thinking of the public speaking classroom as a public space is significant, I believe, particularly in light of social theorists who argue that public space is on the collapse (see Sennett, 1976).

Fundamentally, public space is about providing a space where people can develop an awareness of their connections to and effect upon the world outside of themselves. And, public speaking assumes that public

space exists, that the opportunity to have some impact on the world outside of oneself is possible, since public speaking is ultimately grounded in the fundamental values of a democracy. The public speaking classroom also provides a space that compels students to listen to each other. That said, public space, as it has existed, is not necessarily an ideal space and my thinking about the public speaking classroom is informed by critiques of public sphere theory, particularly feminist critiques as well as critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy. In other words, not all voices have been weighed equally in the public world. As Nancy Fraser (1986) has shown, women's experiences, arguments and reasoning may be discounted or given little credence because they are uttered by women. Some also argue that young people and young adults also face invalidations and lack of "voice" because of age (Sazama, 1999). As Paul Loeb (2001) points out, "most (students) enter our campuses with an attitude of civic resignation, believing their actions on major public issues can't matter" (p. 3).

There are three principal ways that thinking about the public speaking classroom as a public space informs my philosophy of teaching in the Basic Course. These three ways include understanding the situations and perspectives of my students, most of whom are traditional age students (18-22). As indicated previously, many come into the classroom feeling powerless to effect change. I think there is relevance in applying critical pedagogies, "pedagogies of the oppressed" in Paolo Freire's (1993) terms, to understanding how these young adults have been socialized into seeing themselves as marginal to the world outside the University. Second, the notion of the classroom as public space reminds me

of the ways I need to take risks as a teacher, sharing my own thinking and questioning and my engagement in the public world. As Parker Palmer (1998) reminds us, the classroom is ultimately where the public and personal *intersect*, a space full of danger and possibility.

Further, such positioning points to the opportunities I have to engage students on difficult public issues such as racism and sexism and establishing the context that allows marginalized voices to be heard. Foss and Foss's notion of *Inviting Transformation* has had a profound affect on my thinking in this direction. Third, particularly in light of the events of September 11, 2001, I am more convinced of the importance of bringing the outer world into the classroom, to encourage students to speak about and respond to topics of significance given the recent world events. I will address each of these three issues related to the public speaking classroom as public space in my teaching, in terms of what I have been doing and thinking about most recently regarding presentation of material, structures of assignments and training of graduate students.

YOUNG ADULTS IN THE PUBLIC SPACE OF THE CLASSROOM

I have been teaching the Basic Course as a lecturer and assistant director for the past five years, coordinating teaching assistants in a lecture/ lab format that enrolls 600 students per semester. Previously, I only taught public speaking as a stand alone class with 24-28 students in a classroom. One of the key concepts I have carried over from the classroom into the lecture hall is

the concept that emerges from feminist theory and feminist pedagogy of shifting the positioning of faculty as “power authority” in the classroom, to encouraging and supporting the power (and voice) within each student.¹ This presents much more of a challenge in the lecture hall, but in my position of mentoring graduate teaching assistants, I can encourage teaching relationships that both support the unique perspectives and approaches of my graduate students, and in turn encourage them to create a supportive atmosphere in the classroom. One of the ways I try to shift those dynamics of “power over” to supporting the “power within” is through close and affirmative listening. It sounds simple, but there is a great deal of conscious effort and restraint involved in such listening. I try to hold back my own critiques and suggestions until I hear out my graduate students and encourage them to “think through” their struggles and dilemmas related to problems with students or grading, trying to be affirming, modeling what I would like to see them do for their students.

My thinking about students, or young people and young adults as a marginalized group in society, has relevance for dealing with both undergraduates and graduate students, many of whom may have just finished undergraduate programs. Because they are labeled as “young” and “inexperienced,” and students (i.e. still learning) and everything that becomes associated with these terms (often negative), students are treated

¹ Starhawk’s *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex & Politics*, first introduced me to this notion of immanence or power within as radically subversive of a system built upon the notion of “power over.”

as not powerful. They are told that they are not ready yet to make any contribution because they lack sufficient knowledge or not the right knowledge. Young people face systematic oppressions from various societal institutions including schools, colleges and universities which results in their feeling disconnected from a sense of community and even a disconnection from themselves. As Palmer (1990) explains, “Students are often marginal to the society by virtue of their youth, their lack of a productive role, their dependency on the academy for legitimation. Deprived of any sense of public place or power, they withdraw into the private realm where they keep their thoughts to themselves and, sometimes, *from* themselves” (p.15). But, the oppression is not just one suffered by students, as Richard Schaul writes in the introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system” (p.15). As teachers of public speaking, encouraging students to think and express their thoughts to others, we are up against a fair amount of counter-conditioning on our students and on ourselves as teachers. It is useful to remind students of their power since they see little of it in the media which ignore the unique contributions made by young adults, particularly movements and organizations that have had an impact on the world. For example, as Loeb (2001) points out, the American student antiapartheid movement during the mid-1980s and early 90s played “a key role” in passing sanctions on South Africa. Further, it is important to recognize our own power as teachers to influence students and promote self-reflection and even, as hooks (1994) points out, healing, particularly

when we make efforts to incorporate ourselves wholly in the process and step outside our fears in the classroom and in the lecture hall.

One of the points I make early in public speaking, whether in the classroom or in the lecture hall, is that the skills learned in public speaking are not only useful for work environments but also in fostering social change. I always feel the need to make arguments in support of public speaking, since most are taking it as a required course. I point to social movements led by young people such as the Chinese democracy movement and the Anti-Apartheid movement and point out that public speaking is vital to any movement. Unless you can communicate your ideas, experiences and perspectives to others, unless you risk taking a stand, you can not motivate others to change or take action.

THE BASIC COURSE AND THE MEANING OF RISK

In order for students to listen to and absorb new viewpoints and possibilities for change, students must engage themselves wholly in the process. They need to risk showing themselves publicly. And, in thinking about the assignments in the class, beyond their introductory speeches, they can hide behind any number of “tried and true” topics. We often provide a list of topics that have been done in the past and many students, according to our TAs, tend to just choose a topic off the list. That obviously guarantees that they are not risking much. I am increasingly convinced that encouraging students to take risks means that I need to take risks as a teacher, especially in the lecture hall, where students

are particularly attentive to the way I conduct my lectures. Hooks (1994) points to the importance of teachers showing themselves as whole people, sharing their narratives and becoming vulnerable.

I have taken up her call to presenting myself as a whole person, though the lecture hall clearly presents some obstacles and challenges. Still, trying to communicate caring concern about my students, about myself and the world seems to be a way to take those important risks in the lecture hall. I make an effort to make it evident that I care about my students questions and concerns about the course as well as their ideas. Freire (1993) talks about the importance of dialogue in a liberating pedagogy. And, he points out that authentic dialogue cannot take place “in the absence of profound love for the world and its people”(p. 70). He continues, “Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause - the cause of liberation” (p. 70). I communicate my caring (and, I think, love) by listening to students, by not resting on my existing Power Point slides, but always changing my approach to better answer their questions, and stimulate their curiosity and willingness to challenge themselves. I try to find examples that students can relate to, updating them regularly. In addition, I try to share the ways that some of the historical speeches shown in class, such as King's “I Have a Dream,” have impacted me, pointing to the parts I find particularly inspiring and moving and meaningful and encouraging them to do the same. I try to contextualize these speeches and share my own experiences in relation to these moments of history, such as my participation in

the March for Jobs, Peace and Freedom in Washington, D.C. in 1983, twenty years after the march for Civil Rights featuring King's "I Have a Dream." My goal is to help students get a glimpse of their own power - to enable them to articulate effectively their own perspectives on reality.

MAKING SPACE FOR MARGINALIZED VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

Taking risks clearly also involves addressing issues that make people uncomfortable, both students and teachers. But addressing sexism and racism is vital because these conversations make it possible for marginalized voices to enter public space. In addressing sexism and racism I establish rules and guidelines. I always emphasize the notion of respect, both respecting me as a lecturer and relating that to respecting each other when they take turns in front of the classroom. Further, I encourage students to use gender neutral language and explain the importance of such use in terms of improving communication and clarity, and being inclusive. One of the themes I re-emphasize throughout the course is being audience-centered, inviting the audience in, not losing them during the speech. I point to the conundrum faced by women who wonder if the "he" being used as generic is inclusive or not. I also point out, referring to Spender (1985), that the generic "he" is not a natural phenomenon, but one determined by male grammarians in England during the 18th century, who decided that "he" should be generic because the male pronoun was "more comprehen-

sive” than the female (p. 148). I suggest the use of people or human beings rather than mankind and he or she instead of he.

In terms of thinking about how to further anti-racism work, and expanding thinking about audience, I recently introduced an optional informative speech assignment that asks students to “tell us something about your culture.” Part of my motivation comes from Peggy McIntosh's (1995) writing on the invisibility of white privilege and the assumption by white students that “their lives (are) morally neutral, normative and average” (p. 264). When I introduced the assignment, I pointed out that it is usually international students who do the speeches about their culture or their country and traditions. I explained that white, European students and people tend to think they have no culture (i.e. they are just “average,” just American). However, I point out that we all have cultural traditions and it is important to get to know them so that people of color are not objectified as culturally unique and different. I think this assignment has the potential to generate some self-reflection, particularly for white students, who really need to be better in touch with their own cultural “uniqueness” as one small step in the larger project of eliminating racism.

As mentioned earlier, Foss and Foss's (1994) *Inviting Transformation*, has had a profound impact on my thinking about addressing difficult and potentially divisive topics and issues. What I particularly find relevant and important to express to students is the concept of maintaining a space of “safety, value, freedom and openness,” in which different viewpoints are actively sought, appreciated and valued and where people who do not

conform to the “norm” are not ridiculed. I think these concepts go beyond ethical concerns, to the significance of public space as fundamentally inclusive and transformative. In a world that increasingly creates objects or mere consumers out of people and pressures students to conform to survive economically and socially, creating a space to express difference and differences is truly a radical undertaking. It means making room for ideas, people and values that we may find difficult to acknowledge. It means being respectful to each other and expecting respect for myself as teacher. Foss and Foss explain that the emphasis on “presentational speaking as a means to create the conditions of safety, value, freedom and openness” is grounded in the privileging of “growth and change” (p. 6). This relates to Freire’s notion of liberatory teaching as a form of dialogue that is essentially aimed at helping individuals to grow as human beings and gain better understanding of their situation in the world and possibilities for change. As teachers, we need to cherish the opportunity to grow and change in the process of teaching and be willing to discover new perspectives through dialogue with our students. Even in the lecture hall, dialogue, to some degree, is possible.

BRINGING THE WORLD INTO THE CLASSROOM

Freire (1993), Foss and Foss (1994), Palmer (1990, 1998) and others all reference the importance of fostering a space where change and self-discovery is possible and those are clearly characteristics of a public space. In addition, this opportunity for change is linked to seeing

oneself as a subject in relation to the world, with the power to effect change. This brings me to the final point about how to bring the outside world into the classroom and engage students in ways that enable them to see themselves as having some control over the world and understanding the power of speech as a method for exerting that control.

As I indicated earlier, one of the ways I bring the world into the classroom is to contextualize the historical speeches I show. In addition, I feel it is important to share some of my thinking and responses to the disturbing and world-changing events of the past years. These are the events that bind us to our students. As a professor and a lecturer, I feel it is my responsibility to address them, to break the silence, to acknowledge fear and uncertainty. I think it is important to show how I am responding emotionally and intellectually and to make space for student voices to be heard. Recently, I transformed a lecture on the fundamentals of persuasive speaking into an introduction to speech, rhetoric and policy making in the public world. I pointed to the fact that we cannot be fully cognizant of future outcomes, but must make decisions about actions based on the best reasoning and arguments we can find or the best reasoning and arguments that we can make. That day I gave students time during lecture to express some reasons for or against the war with Iraq.

Approaching the classroom or lecture hall as a public space clearly has had an impact on the decisions I make regarding the use of class time and the presentation of material. I increasingly feel the importance of explaining guidelines for public speaking in light of world events, making those connections more salient, in an

effort to get students motivated to use public speaking to make connections themselves. My goal is to get the students beyond thinking of public speaking as a course just to get through, but to help them see it as the foundation of something larger and more significant, as a skill for constructing meaning with others in public space and as a skill for effecting change.

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