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Preparing to Prepare Quality Speakers: What New Basic Course Instructors Need to Know

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Speaking is an enormously complex activity (National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, 2005), which cannot be separated completely into parts (delivery without content, content without language, organization without content or language, etc.). Yet there is a tendency for most new instructors to misunderstand the basic course. Beginning instructors often focus only on products (e.g., outlines and bibliographies) that stand in as tangible evidence of mastery rather than the process of developing skilled communicators.

Products are not the *point* of the course – the *point* is for students to be more effective communicators with an audience; it does not matter if students have perfect outlines and speaker notes if they do not improve their speaking skills. In Vygotskian terms *the central or valued activity* of the course’s instructional activities should support students to improve this activity, and none should be merely preliminary to it. Students at every point should be doing a (simplified, easier, more difficult) version of the valued activity. There is an old saying among football coaches: Players who spend a lot of time running through rows of old tires mostly get better at running through rows of old tires.

Students should focus on practicing speaking skills, not just preliminary activities such as learning concepts about speaking. A common obstacle for training instruc-

tors is to describe the valued activity in an appropriate way. Often instructors first think the assignments included in the basic course simply *are* the activity the course teaches, but they are not. For example, giving an "informative speech" is supposed to help students become better public or oral communicators in general – the speech is a means to that, not an end itself.

As we contemplate the important elements for training new basic course instructors two variables emerge: (1) how instructors situate the course's structure and composition and (2) the skills needed for teaching the course. The first section details *how instructors should prepare the course in terms of learning outcomes, pedagogy, and evaluation*. The second section outlines *how these new teachers should meet the learning outcomes, engage students through pedagogy, and create meaningful evaluation*.

THE BASIC COURSE AS A PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE

The basic course has been defined as "that course either required or recommended for a significant number of undergraduates" (Gibson, Gruner, Brooks, & Petrie, 1970, p. 13). The purpose of the basic course is to teach students how to prepare and deliver appropriate and effective messages for various contexts. Usually this course introduces students to the study of communication, so our roles as instructors are even more consequential (Beebe, 2013). Accordingly, we wish to outline our ideas about how instructors should situate the structure and content of the basic course.

Learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes comprise the vital, core aspects of the basic course (see Wallace, 2014). These outcomes identify what students should be able to demonstrate as a result of *what* and *how* they have learned in the basic course beyond simply verbal and nonverbal components of delivery (Maki, 2010). While the course's performance dimension is vital (often the most terrifying aspect for students) good performance is a product of effective content preparation. For us, this means that public speaking requires the ability to organize information, ideas and arguments to achieve a variety of goals with an audience, including informative, persuasive and argumentative goals. We argue the instructor's pedagogy should be content-driven.

When a speaker is competent, an audience is able to comprehend the content of a speech (Brodie, Powers, & Fitch-Hauser, 2006). While the charismatic qualities of a gifted speaker can mesmerize students, they may conceal weaknesses in the integrity of the content and speech organization. The surface of the speech, good or bad, is easier to attend to than the content. Deepening appreciation of content and argument is a – perhaps *the* – core task instructors should set for their students. Basic course students gain confidence and appear most competent to listeners when they preview their main points, follow the previewed organizational pattern marked with clear transitions between those points, and summarize the main points in the conclusion. Yet to master organization, students need to understand deeply what they want to argue, persuade or inform about, so their ability to organize ends up connecting

back to research, content, translation of technical information and so on.

Pedagogy

In addition to clear and appropriate learning outcomes, instructors must provide a safe place for learning. A public speaking course may not necessarily seek to "make students comfortable" speaking (that is difficult for most of us!) but the classroom climate has to make them comfortable *learning* to speak. Their safety derives from instructors embracing a scaffolded, active-learning pedagogy that supports student risk-taking. Instructors should create opportunities for mistakes in the skill building stages without a significant negative grade impact, thus allowing students to view both failures and successes equally as opportunities for learning. Effective instructors use missteps as stepping-stones to guide learners to develop solutions to their own problems. New basic course instructors would be wise to understand that learners acquire public speaking skills incrementally (Lucas, 1999), and that creating a classroom that allows for learners to risk, error, learn, and persist as speakers is fundamental for building competent communication skills. Bruner (1977) captured this concept best when he noted that a teacher's primary goal is to help learners discover that success and failure are not rewards and punishment, but only information. Given the high emotional stakes of public speaking for students, who sometimes experience even competent performances as humiliating failures, instructors must work extra hard to build a safe and secure classroom climate.

New basic course instructors should understand the process dimension for developing a speech. Integrating time for process into the course structure, in the form of exercises and workshops, aids developing speakers to formulate sound organizational patterns and useful preparation skills for performance. Our vision of this classroom setting involves students actively engaged in the preparation of their speechmaking: developing skills for the speaking occasion, applying high-order thinking (analyses of their own speeches and speaking choices), gaining holistic comprehension of the intent and impact of the speech, and evaluating the preparation and performance process which produced the speech.

Instructors should offer specific occasions where students interact with them and collaborate with others, particularly on tasks for preparing future speeches. These workshops enhance the learners' competencies and confidence in acquiring effective speech skills. For example, we suggest allowing learners to test speech sections, such as the introduction with smaller audiences. We recommend incorporating a rotation and limited periods for speech rehearsals to various small groups within the class. Instructors can use such strategies to expose learners to subsets of their audience while practicing (and improving) speaking skills that will later be graded.

Evaluation

Understanding how speakers' initial imperfect attempts at speaking help them to learn is only possible when clear, achievable standards are communicated to learners. Hence, well-articulated standards help communicate how students can use the standard to reflex-

ively assess their own preparation to improve the process for the next speech. Central course activities should align with the standards of achievement for learners; the expectations should be apparent and achievable during exercises, homework, drafts and so on. We suggest effective instructors use a rubric as a communication tool (see Schreiber, Paul, & Shibley, 2012).

Rubrics must communicate the important standards and emphasize attributes of the speech and speaker beyond delivery; the course will not be content driven unless the instructor creates a rubric that clearly and consistently communicates the importance of a speaker's content. Therefore, instructors should design and use a rubric that is "weighted" to include more criteria that relate to the speech content and structure of the message.

Learners should utilize these rubrics to assess other student speakers or example speeches via video replay. The basic course requires reflexive skill recognition, based on peer feedback, instructor feedback, and (by means of video) self-generated feedback. In essence, the same knowledge that allows a speaker to produce competent skills is the knowledge that forms the foundation to recognize competent speaking skills in self and others (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Assessing speakers and their skills together allows students to understand the standards of achievement, familiarize themselves with the rubric, create meaning with the instructor about the expectations for the speech, and begin the process of norming standards as a class.

PREPARING TO TEACH THE BASIC COURSE AS A PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE

Given the elements we have outlined when a new instructor is preparing to teach the basic course – learning outcomes, pedagogy, and evaluation – we now turn to what new instructors should know and be able to do, in order to begin becoming effective instructors.

Meeting the Learning Outcomes

New instructors need to realize some learning outcomes are clearly subordinate to others. In order to begin the process of identifying superior and subordinate learning outcomes, instructors should pinpoint the most essential learning outcomes to build speaking skills. When analyzing the activities new instructors choose to include in the course as they relate to the learning outcomes, Aristotle makes the point in *The Rhetoric* (1.I.14) that we should not define these in terms of successfully persuading the audience, but in terms of choosing the possible goals and the possible techniques for achieving them. Hence, he defines rhetoric as "seeing the possible means of persuasion." The idea of effective communication in the classroom is not that every listener agrees and is persuaded, but that the speaker understood what the choices relative to that end were, and made smart and defensible ones. Therefore, the question trembling new students in the basic course should ask themselves is not, "Will I be a perfect communicator by the end of the term?" ("No, and we promise not to grade you on that.") The more effective way to frame the purpose of the basic course for the learner is, "Will I learn, through guided practice, what

choices I have as a communicator and how best to make them?" Here we see why the course must be content focused. The vast majority of the choices students make are content choices: research, information, arguments, supporting material, and the adaptation of all this to the audience.

How does stage fright fit in? We argue it is a strategic error for instructors to let stage fright dominate the course. Students need to give better speeches at the end of the term than at the beginning. If they feel more comfortable speaking, that is a bonus, but not the point of the course; while communication apprehension can serve as a barrier to improved performance for some students, many excellent speakers are never comfortable, their whole lives, with public speaking. Similar to public speaking, almost all students have engaged in competitive activities that, while making them nervous, are ultimately satisfying.

We propose new instructors use learning outcomes to guide their pedagogy for the basic course in the following hierarchy: (1) Using clear language and organization for the audience; (2) Connecting with the audience; (3) Achieving a communication goal(s) with the audience; (4) Adapting ideas to people and people to ideas; and (5) Making communication choices and being responsible for those choices. These should guide instructor decision-making for any assignment in the basic course.

Engaging Pedagogy

Instructors need to create humiliation-free classrooms that directly support the learning goals. The classroom is the place where student anxiety becomes a

legitimate issue. It is easy to confuse critique of one's choices with critique of oneself. If a student hears, "Those points could be in a different order," as "You're a terrible communicator," the student may lose motivation and could have trouble concentrating on the activity to become a better communicator. Therefore, we owe our students "simple decency" (see Bain, 2004, p. 18). No matter how tough the critique is, or how bad the speech was, our verbal and nonverbal communication must consistently communicate respect and esteem for the student as a human being. That respect is consistent with tough grades and critiques, but instructors have the responsibility to make sure that students do not feel ashamed for creating a bad outline or mixing up the order of points when delivering the speech. Role-playing how to provide feedback that addresses choices and behavior(s) of students separate from the individual while preserving the standards and expectations for the course is fundamental. Cultivating a persona that unconditionally approves of everyone while critiquing their work is essential for new instructors.

As John Campbell (1996) has pointed out, a public speaking classroom is a community; a community of learners, which, through thinking about what to say and what has been said, deliberates important issues of the day. In a classroom focused on lecture and "covering concepts" with no meaningful discussion, perhaps the tone of the classroom does not matter as much. However, with a pedagogy focused on doing, and doing together, the tone of the classroom becomes all-important. When students believe that the instructor is supportive and positive toward every speaker, they can become highly motivated and outperform expectations.

Meaningful Evaluation

For most new instructors of the basic course, grading is, unfortunately, the most challenging and least fun part. Nothing is worse than feeling insecure about the grades one returns to students, because grades matter so much to them. Students typically perceive speaking grades as subjective, and in some cases their frustration about perceived arbitrary grades can be intimidating to a new instructor. A more substantive way to address student (and instructor) concerns about subjectivity is to construct detailed rubrics and incorporate them deeply into the course.

Rubrics should be introduced early, and discussed regularly; that way students are never in doubt about how they will be evaluated. Learners can work out some of their anxiety by working with the rubric. If the rubric for a given speech assignment is well-constructed, it will reference terminology from lectures and the textbook. Hence, students will be motivated to understand the rubric, expectations communicated in the rubric, and look more deeply into the course content to increase their comprehension of the rubric. Essentially, a rubric mediates between the expectations of the course and the skills they are supposed to enable. As students practice various kinds of speaking, the rubric becomes a way to create a useful dialogue between performance outcomes and the process for reaching those standards of achievement.

CONCLUSION

In sum, preparing new instructors will be most effective when a clear conception of the course comes to-

gether with an understanding of requirements for learners and teachers. When these elements cohere, teaching the basic course is a satisfying and rewarding experience.

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