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Assessment 'Responsibilities' in the Basic Course: Evaluating Public Speaking Rubrics

Cover Page Footnote

This article is a portion of the dissertation titled "Academic Responsibilities: Challenging Ableist Perspectives in Public Speaking Programs" (2022) at the University of Alabama.

Assessment ‘ResponsAbilities’ in the Basic Course: Evaluating Public Speaking Rubrics

Miranda N. Rouse, Hampden-Sydney College

Abstract

Procedures and practices that are ableist in the educational system have been long overlooked. Speakers having differing abilities than neurotypical or able-bodied individuals is often not something that is considered in basic course assessment tools. This is important to address because although there are institutional policies and procedures in place to help students with differing abilities, instructors of public speaking have the autonomy or power to determine how such accommodations will affect the speech grade determined by the assessment tool. Power relations are significantly complicated in educational settings when strict hierarchies are imposed, and when instructors abuse their authority, which might lead to unequal power dynamics, especially at the beginning of a course, because the instructor holds power in shaping the course. Additionally, since assessment tools such as rubrics reinforce societal norms, they can also encourage bias from the instructor (Ashby-King et al., 2021). This analysis will examine current assessment tools used by instructors in the public speaking course from a critical disability lens paired with rhetorical content analysis to uncover ableist perspectives.¹

Keywords: ableism, public speaking, assessment, disability studies, instructional communication, speech pedagogy; basic course

¹ This article is a portion of the dissertation titled “Academic ResponsAbilities: Challenging Ableist Perspectives in Public Speaking Programs” (2022) at the University of Alabama.

Many classes in the basic course include an element of public speaking if they are not fully dedicated to it. Assessment is imperative to college courses and allows for the instructor to determine if a student is retaining course information. Usually, textbooks, lessons, lectures, classroom activities, and specifically, watching example speeches, are utilized to teach public speaking before assessing students on their performance. Furthermore, watching speech examples is a common way for students to learn best practices before being graded by their instructor. Additionally, instructors may even have their students use a rubric to grade an example speech video in the learning process. Unfortunately, the chance of a speaker having abilities different than those of neurotypical or able-bodied individuals is not often something considered in the development of public speaking rubrics. Notably, many well-known speakers include individuals with visible and invisible disabilities, whether acknowledged or not. One of the most popular TED Talks of all time is with Sir Ken Robinson (Ted Conferences, 2024). Robinson, who passed away from cancer in 2020, was diagnosed with poliomyelitis, more commonly known as polio, which often causes paralysis and can sometimes be fatal. By the age of four, Robinson reported walking with a limp. Regardless of Robinson's diagnosis, Robinson was well known for their ability to connect with the audience through exemplary delivery skills (Bates, 2020). Robinson frequently walked with a cane, which is visible in said TED presentation. If this TED Talk is used as an example speech for teaching public speaking students, how might students assess Robinson in the delivery section of a rubric? Yes, in higher education there are accommodations for specific disabilities, but when an instructor receives accommodation documentation for a student, there are no details and the documents generally include things that are extremely vague and not directly applicable for public speaking. Instructors of public speaking have the autonomy or power to determine how such accommodations will affect the speech grade determined by the assessment rubric. This analysis examines current assessment tools used by instructors in the public speaking course from a critical disability lens paired with rhetorical content analysis to uncover ableist perspectives. This is discussed by first delving into ableist challenges to public speaking, instructor power and responsibilities, assessment in the basic course, and theory before going into the method, analysis, findings, and discussion. Findings from this analysis can help reframe assessment in the basic course to be more inclusive of differing abilities.

Public Speaking Programs and Ableism

Ableism is privileging non-disabled individuals and placing value in able-bodied individuals as the standard or *norm*. The projected number of adults living with a disability in the U.S. has been projected to continue to increase (Okoro et al., 2018, Paul, et al., 2020), thus educators can expect to have an increase of diverse students in the classroom (Harrison & Myrick, 2020), which will more than likely include students with disabilities. This can “often present physical, social, and academic challenges to classroom teachers,” but studies have shown that it can be beneficial for both students with and without disabilities to include individuals with differing abilities in the same classroom (Powell & Powell, 2010, p. 95). With this in mind, it is imperative to consider how ableism is perpetuated in the basic course. One specific source of ableism is the assessment process of public speaking students. Without training for dismantling ableism, instructors are likely to include their bias when evaluating students (Darling, 1992). The growing number of students with differing abilities in higher education will increase the chance of diverse students within public speaking courses. It is important to understand the general training, or lack thereof, of public speaking instructors, before discussing the importance of assessment in the course. This understanding paves the way for the use of critical disability theory in this analysis and begins with an acknowledgment of what power an instructor holds in the classroom.

Power Contexts in the Classroom

Instructional communication scholarship is concerned with the process of how students and teachers simultaneously transfer information verbally and nonverbally to create shared meanings and understandings (Conley & Ah Yun, 2017; Preiss & Wheelless, 2014; McCroskey et al., 2004; Morreale, 2015; Richmond et al., 2006). Instructional communication theory values teaching and learning as a process, and a set of three models are commonly used to theorize instructional communication research to understand the communication process through action, interaction, and transaction (Houser & Hosek, 2018). Communication as a transaction is where communication is occurring between the teacher and the students and meaning is then co-created by both parties as source and the receiver at the same time (Richmond et al., 2006; Houser & Hosek, 2018). This is important to recognize when considering power relations in the classroom, as the transactional communication model should be the goal.

Power relations are significantly complicated in educational settings when strict hierarchies are imposed and instructors abuse their authority. In the classroom, despite our best efforts, there will always be a presence of unequal power dynamics, especially at the beginning of a course, because the instructor holds power to shape both the curriculum and how relevant topics are presented. Teachers communicate with students from some degree of social influence (Schrodt et al., 2008; Turman & Schrodt, 2006), and “in most classrooms there is an invisible hegemony that belongs to the teachers” (Song, 2021, p. 416). One of the consequential power levels in the classroom is a teacher’s ability to assign grades. Usually, various assessments are available to help determine grades in ways that align with learning outcomes or goals, but sometimes the assessment results are due to unfair uses of power that act as vehicles for ideology.

There is an ethical responsibility to design and assess courses with diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of consideration, and that diversity includes neurodiversity and physical ability. Students with disabilities have been left out of the construction of higher education courses for far too long. In the past, “education for students with disabilities appeared to be a privilege rather than a right” (Brantlinger, 2006, p. 87). Rather than inclusion being based on privilege or power, a shift needs to be made “from a culture of ableism to a culture of access” (Kleinfeld, 2018, p. 7), and the public speaking course has a role to play in that transition. Specifically, because the basic course (or the public speaking course) is a staple in the Communication field, it should encourage students to share their unique experiences and voice their opinions on various topics through bodily rhetoric that is sensitive to each person’s unique circumstances. With less acceptance of various ways of thinking and being in the world, there may be limitations on an instructor’s ability to create a safe space for these conversations to happen in the classroom or to allow students the freedom to grow and learn in their own unique ways. In the past, the disability community has been excluded from Western society, and “people with disabilities have been excluded from mainstream education, employment, service provision and full participation in society” (Harpur, 2009, p. 163). One way that students with disabilities are being discriminated against in the basic course is through the assessment tools and rubrics used in the course. Unfortunately, while assessment tools are designed for the purposes of creating fair and equal procedures, they are also artifacts of cultural norms, and as such, many assessment tools used to grade students perpetuate ableist assumptions. For example, “an ableist education would require all students (including those with reduced vision) to study textbooks

with standard-size fonts and would not take into consideration individual student's limitations" (Harpur, 2009, p. 164). This example showcases overlooked, longstanding procedures and practices that are ableist in the educational system.

Assessment in the Basic Course

Currently, there is not a shared assessment tool used by all basic course programs. The absence of a universal assessment tool could be positive for extinguishing ableism in the various assessment approaches used for assessing public speaking. However, through this analysis, one can comprehend that there is a common trend that ableism exists in the various assessment tools being used. The public speaking course's future depends on careful analysis and adjustments that include a broad understanding of student capability. Taking a look at arguably the most well-known competencies, or learning outcomes, that have become the foundation for many assessment tools makes clear the problem exclusionary perspectives pose to specific student populations. The Competent Speaker Speech Evaluation Form, revised once since its creation in 1990, was established by the National Communication Association (NCA) Committee on Assessment and Testing (Morreale et al., 2007). Although the NCA has since dedicated much time to evaluating what revisions need to be made to the basic public speaking course, and many extensions of this form have been created by other scholars, disabled perspectives need more consideration. Communication faculty and administrators need to question the training of instructors and the use of assessment tools for public speaking courses (Hugenberg & Yoder, 1994), specifically to ensure that they do not promote ableist norms.

Since rubrics reinforce societal norms, they can also encourage bias from the instructor (Ashby-King et al., 2021). Instructors have the power to determine how they will (or will not) use said rubrics when assessing students. Scholarship from writing centers have focused on changes to this approach. Rather than assessing students on their abilities, writing center research has determined that there needs to be a focus on considering the diverse learning needs of students (Daniels et al., 2015, p. 21). Writing center research encourages educators to reassess pedagogy and training in order to address inclusion, with a specific goal of accommodating the disability community (Dembsey, 2020). It will be beneficial to have focused training for instructors to learn about being more inclusive of students with differing abilities and could be a starting point to more inclusivity with assessment tools as well.

Assessment. Assessments are essential to maintain programs and departments as they can help determine where improvements need to be made in the instruction of public speaking courses and verify that students understand course material (Allen, 2002; Hunter et al., 2014; McCroskey, 2007; Meyer et al., 2010). Rubrics are an assessment tool often used to grade oral presentations in communication courses (Dunbar et al., 2006). Public speaking rubrics often include text that can penalize students with disabilities, such as “eliminate distracting characteristics, increase eye contact, enunciate clearly/naturally, eliminate distracting mannerisms, gesture naturally, control your facial expressions, stand up straight and tall, movement needed and so on” (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 206). Rubrics regularly use the loaded terminology of “natural,” but what comes as natural to one person may not be natural for another person. The dissertation that this analysis is pulled from (Rouse, 2022) discusses how *good* posture, for example, should not be based on Western cultural norms of the term but rather medically and personally determined (Gilman, 2014). Take Robinson’s use of a cane; they physically had medical barriers that prohibited traditional standards for *good* posture. In drawing attention to posture in this way, rubrics project cultural misconceptions that people with disabilities are feeble and deficient.

There are still many courses that value outdated delivery ideals that include “standards for “effective” communication [that] rest on ableist assumptions” (Tigert & Miller, 2022, p. 1). Some of the most familiar categories found in speech assessments include “maintaining eye contact, standing at a podium, and controlling body movements,” yet these examples include ableist assumptions that offer minimal room for a range in ability (Tigert & Miller, 2022, p. 1). Gunn (2010) argues that in the shift away from orality, the field of Communication has labored to conceal the unpredictability of the human body, thus assuming that stronger minds are evidenced by bodily control. Analyzing rubrics promises to expose the inattention to disability within the assessment tools used for public speaking programs. Additionally, many instructors are likely to harbor ableist worldviews established by social norms when using the assessment tools, depending on the criteria and categories present on the rubric (Ashby-King et al., 2021). Newer instructors and teaching assistants might still be figuring out their teaching style by learning while teaching (Parker et al., 2015), and might be stricter with rubrics and use them without much grace or flexibility.

Past Studies on Assessments. Similar to the approach taken for this analysis, Ashby-King et al. (2021) completed an interpretive analysis of public speaking

presentation rubrics to determine the constraints and opportunities to practice critical communication pedagogy. The results identify three levels of power dynamics present in the rubrics: high context, shared context, and low context. The authors suggested aiming for a shared context type rubric for public speaking courses “to advance equity and social justice in the introductory communication course” (Ashby-King et al., 2021, p. 14). Their study also emphasized the use of power in the classroom, but did not discuss various levels of power. Past research on power dynamics in the classroom pulled from French and Raven’s (1959) interpretation of power categories. For example, Richmond and McCroskey’s (1984) study questioned if teacher power was associated with student cognitive learning and based the study on French and Raven’s (1959) research. Richmond and McCroskey’s (1984) results concluded that coercive power and legitimate power were less effective for cognitive learning, referent and expert power enhance learning, and reward power appeared to be unrelated to learning outcomes; thus, “this lack of relationship raises a significant challenge to those who argue that rewards should be employed to motive students” (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984, p. 136). Their results match that of studies completed since then that argue that “referent, expert, and reward power are perceived as prosocial forms of power and are generally positively associated with cognitive learning” and that “legitimate and coercive power are viewed by students as antisocial forms of power and are negatively associated with these same learning outcomes” (Schrodt et al., 2008, p. 183). This analysis will draw from both studies mentioned above to examine ableist perspectives within the assessment rubrics currently used in public speaking courses. By expanding the power context levels from Ashby-King et al. (2021) to include the levels of power from French and Raven (1959), and by utilizing critical disability theory, this analysis of rubrics will determine how levels of power can lead to ableism in the public speaking course.

Theoretical Impact: Critical Disability Theory

The opposite of being able-bodied is not disabled; instead, abilities occur along a continuum. Like race, gender, class, or ethnicity, abilities are used to categorize individuals into particular social groups. Individuals can be a part of many social groups or communities at once, given that identity is always multifaceted and that various identifying factors, such as disability, culture, and race, can overlap (Parry-Giles, 2021). Still, one can also have fewer abilities than someone else and not consider themselves part of the disability community. “Disorder” is a medical term,

whereas “disability” is societally based and often used as a legal term. Devlin and Pothier (2006) state: “Disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to (p. 2).” Critical disability theory is specifically concerned with physical and cognitive realities and emphasizes power dynamics based on abilities (Rocco, 2005). Critical disability theory values disability studies and critical race theory (Rocco, 2005). Critical disability theory is critical insofar that it challenges ideologies of disability and demands that rather than insisting people with disabilities are accommodated or learn to live in an able-bodied environment, it is economic, social, and political policies that must be changed and a shift in power and control should be enacted in favor of individuals with disabilities (Gillies, 2014).

This analysis supports the contention that ableism is present within the basic course.

The delivery section of the assessment rubrics was the only section that was listed across all rubrics; thus, this section is the focus. Other sections were similar across rubrics, such as content areas, but were not the same and difficult to analyze without having prior knowledge of the specific course material or specifics of the assignment since both vary per class and/or institution. By focusing on the delivery sections of assessment rubrics, a detailed explanation of ableist discrimination can be discussed. This leads to the following research question:

RQ: In what ways do assessment tools in the basic course reflect ableist perspectives?

Method

Rhetorical critics are often concerned with power and ideologies, as they aim to explain how rhetoric works in the world to persuasively shape societal norms and perceptions (Foss, 2017). Historically, rhetorical studies have valued perfection and control, and “rhetoric has never been particularly friendly to the disabled, the deformed, the deaf or mute, the less-than-perfect in voice, expression or stance” (Brueggemann & Fredal, 1998, p. 251). Many scholars have highlighted how rhetorical studies can be an ally for disability studies by showcasing new perspectives when pairing rhetoric and disability studies together (Parry-Giles, 2021; Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001). A combination of rhetorical criticism and content analysis

offers the optimal opportunity for analyzing rubrics so as to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities. Content analysis is a flexible method used for analyzing text and the “specific type of content analysis approach chosen by a researcher varies with the theoretical and substantive interests of the researcher and the problem being studied” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). A rhetorical content analysis of 30 public speaking rubrics was used to locate ableist perspectives present in public speaking courses and specifically within the assessment tools used. The artifacts that were analyzed are public speaking assessment rubrics for persuasive speeches from various higher educational institutions in the United States. and were collected via email. Once obtained, they were stored in a single folder, analyzed individually, and then compared to one another. Examining rubrics as rhetorical artifacts emphasizes the ideology the assessment tools possess and allows for criticism on how instructional power can be made in favor of able-bodies when used to assess students with disabilities.

Purposive sampling was used to collect the persuasive rubrics for this analysis. Persuasive rubrics were chosen to follow the structure from Ashby-King et al., 2021. First, a request was sent out for rubrics to COMMNotes, the NCA listserv. Second, another request for rubrics went out directly to introductory communication course directors and administrators using the NCA basic course directory. Participants were asked to send rubrics that assess a persuasive speech for analysis in a dissertation. The rubrics were then stripped of any identification, saved to a folder, and organized for analysis upon collection. A final total of 30 rubrics were included for data analysis from colleges and universities in the United States from both undergraduate and graduate courses. Some instructors were hesitant to provide their rubrics, thus I have intentionally excluded any identifying information, such as school demographics, for anonymity.

Analysis

Analyzing the delivery sections of the rubrics allows for a thorough discussion. Upon analysis, it was useful to include elements from other sections of the rubrics as well that translate to students’ delivery abilities. For example, some rubrics did not include a category for eye contact in the delivery section but did include categories elsewhere that could translate to the general goal of eye contact. Public speaking programs are ableist in many ways, but by first focusing on how ableism is present through the assessment tools used, we can address how the rubrics promote the use

of power and biases. By revealing the ableism in the assessment rubrics, the ideologies of an *effective* speaker are also revealed, which suggests that students with disabilities be accommodated into the course rather than the course being designed for students with disabilities.

The study by Ashby-King et al. (2021) was used as an example to inspect the rubrics for this analysis. Ashby-King et al. (2021) determined three levels of contextual richness within rubrics to showcase power dynamics in the classroom: high context, low context, and shared context. The high context is “rubrics that offer rigid, specific directives and deliverables that function as a checklist of behaviors students must complete” (Ashby-King et al., 2021, p. 7). The low context is “rubrics that provide vague and subjective expectations, unclear standards, and lack directives (Ashby-King et al., 2021, p. 7). Shared context is “rubrics that create the opportunity for shared meaning-making throughout the assessment process and allow for the evaluation of each students’ individual presentation” (Ashby-King et al., 2021, p. 7). These were redefined to address the different categories of power in relation to (dis)abilities. Ableist assumptions are presented through three new contexts: coercive context, legitimate context, and referent/expert context. This revision includes four of the five bases of power by French and Raven (1959). Reward was excluded since, in this case, receiving a good grade would be the reward; more on this is noted in the discussion of limitations. The results included rubrics from all three of the new context categories (see Table 1 for an explanation of rubric contexts and examples from the key findings).

Table 1. Rubric Contexts Definitions and Examples

	Coercive Context	Legitimate Context	Referent/ Expert Context
Definition	Rubrics that provide firm, detailed expectations for abilities.	Rubrics that provide vague and subjective expectations for abilities.	Rubrics that create the opportunity for shared meaning of abilities per student.
Example	“Made extensive eye contact to establish trust.”	“Eye contact.”	No section specifically dedicated to eye contact.

By examining each rubric individually on multiple occasions, each rubric was assigned to one of the three categories based on wording influenced by the model in Ashby-King et al. (2021). There were times when multiple categories were labeled in one rubric, but it was then determined which one it fell into by comparing which context category was most present in the rubric.

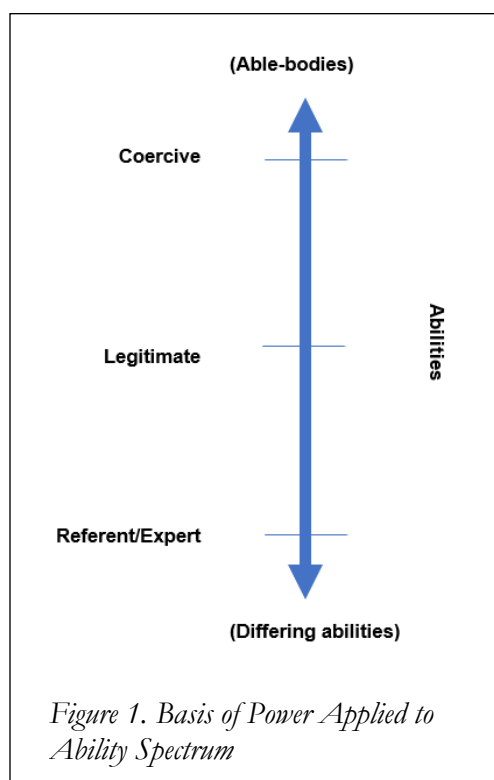
Findings

The results included two parts to address the research question, 1) an explanation of how the power contexts is present in the delivery sections, and 2) where specifically the rubrics display ableist assumptions in the delivery sections. The delivery section of each rubric was analyzed overall and then re-examined based on the specific categories found within the delivery sections (listed below). Each category displayed either coercive context or legitimate context. When a rubric did not state a specific category, other sections outside of the delivery section were examined to determine if referent/expert context was present.

Power Contexts

Like past research suggesting that coercive and legitimate power were less effective for learning and that referent and expert power enhanced learning (Richmond & McCroskey, 1984; Schrodt et al., 2008), the same theory could be applied to the acceptance of differing abilities within the rubrics (see Figure 1). Many of the rubrics assumed that students would be able-bodied, which resulted in either landing in the coercive or legitimate contexts because both contexts began with ableist assumptions.

Coercive Context. Categories placed into the coercive context were assessments that left little room for various abilities but instead suggested one-single way to achieve a successful grade on a speech. This type of language used descriptive words



(i.e., “natural”) along with the direct source for assessing (i.e., “eye contact”). Other descriptors included, “maintain,” “purposeful,” “natural,” and “meaningful,” as an expectation for the action. For example, rather than stating “gestures,” a coercive context rubric included statements such as “gestures: distracting, imbalanced, steady, balanced, comfortable,” “your body movement (gestures and posture) made the presentation compelling, and you appeared polished,” or “gestures are big and engaging and are appropriate to the speech.” Coercive context language tends to be highly ableist and lower in power transfer to the students due to low flexibility and high restrictions. This follows the results from the high context rubrics from Ashby-King et al. (2021) displaying a behavior checklist. The assumption within this type of rubric is that students have minimal control over the expectation of what they are being assessed on in this context. Coercive context language favored able-bodies by limiting the scope of abilities to one standard ideal that assumed each student was able to do the function being assessed and in a way that the instructor believed was acceptable. There was still a level of assumption of abilities in the next context as well.

Legitimate Context. Legitimate power contexts were more flexible in meaning due to being more ambiguous with the terms used. For example, broad language such as “movement” or “posture/poise” was not accompanied by any descriptive words. This could lead to varied interpretations and misinterpretations between students and teachers but nonetheless was still exclusive to able-bodies. Legitimate power still assumes what students can and cannot do. The wide range of interpretations can lead to the one in power being in control. Legitimate power contexts present a higher chance of power flow to students but can also be limiting as the meaning of the vague terms is, in turn, subjectively determined by the instructor. A student might think that gestures in a speech should be limited to minimal hand movement, whereas an instructor might consider gestures bold movements that emphasize crucial ideas. Of course, the classroom is where these discrepancies should be addressed, but it is often the case that problems are only addressed after the grade is assigned. Because legitimate power usually has a standard or code to follow, this would mean that the student and teacher would both need to understand what is meant by the category being assessed before giving the speech. However, the standard is ultimately created or influenced by the teacher. Another example of legitimate context that did not fit into the most common categories stated, “used nonverbal communication effectively.” However, this is still potentially ableist because effectiveness is ambiguous.

Referent/Expert Context. Lastly, referent/expert context language included flexibility in expectations and the opportunity for co-creation between teacher and student. The difference between legitimate context is that instead of using ambiguous language or terms, students and teachers can co-create a shared meaning that can include a range of abilities. Referent/expert context language included phrases that did not assume a student's abilities. For example, two rubrics did not have a specific section for eye contact. This is not to say that eye contact was not evaluated; rather, it was not assumed that each student was able to be assessed on their eye contact. Referent/expert context language promotes differing abilities because it does not include statements specific to abilities and allows space for shared meaning. Referent/expert context also promotes the expansion of the ideal public speaker because a shared understanding is determined between teacher and student. Although this type of language was less common than the two counterparts, it was included here to explain how a rubric can become less ableist depending on the language used on the assessment rubric. One of the rubrics that did not have a section on eye contact did include a section that stated, "connected with the audience," whereas other rubrics lumped the two together with "eye contact that connects with the audience." Small changes that take out the ableist assumptions can make substantial changes to the public speaking course overall. Removing the assumption of abilities also allows for the co-creation process to happen so that the instructor and student can determine the expectations together. Nearly every rubric displayed language of at least two of the contexts. To explain this, a breakdown of the most common categories found in the delivery sections of the rubrics will be explained.

Common Categories

Each rubric had a section dedicated to delivery, although the grade amount for the delivery sections varied per rubric. The most common categories found in the delivery sections are presented in Figure 2, along with the levels of power contexts per section. These sections particularly seemed to include substantial ableist

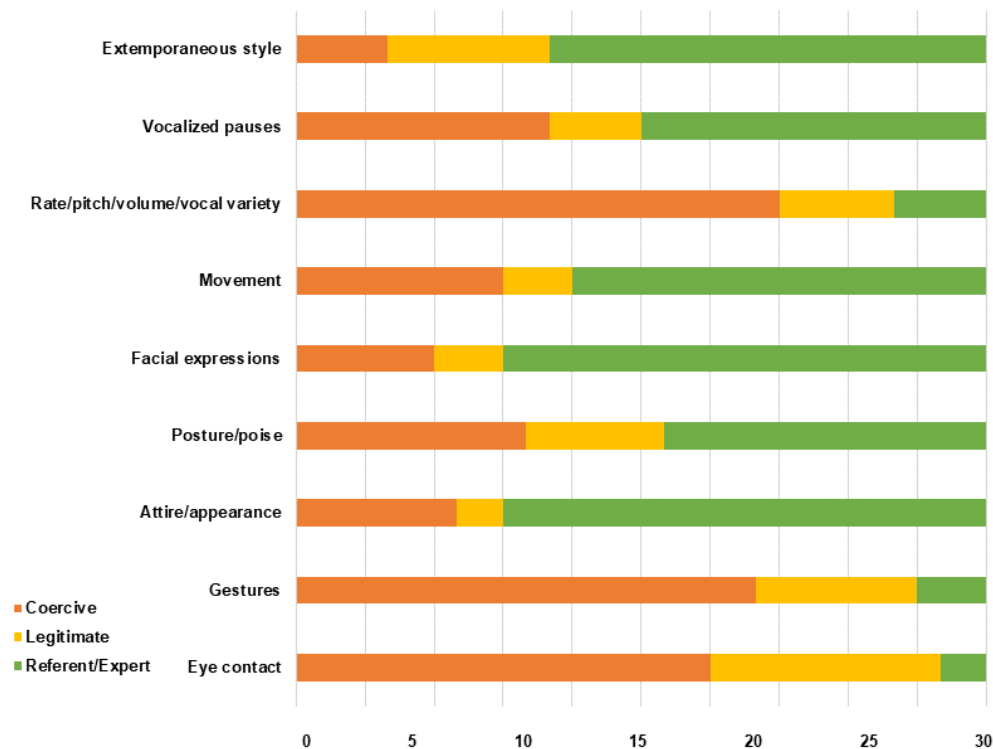


Figure 2. Power Contexts Per Delivery Categories

assumptions based on the language used. The common categories varied among coercive, legitimate, and referent/expert context and will be explained in further detail.

Eye Contact. Eye contact assumes that the speaker will be without visual impairments and/or they are comfortably able to make eye contact. For some individuals living with disabilities, trying to maintain eye contact can be taxing, exhausting, and feel uncomfortable. A nationally ranked forensic (competitive speech) student who identifies as Autistic² explained to me that presenting a speech to a large crowd was the easy part; the hard parts included maintaining eye contact to be a *convincing* speaker to speech judges. Some rubrics, for example, state “sustained eye contact with entire audience” and that eye contact is needed “90%; span the audience” and “at least 70-80% of the time,” yet, in general, adults typically make eye contact 30-60% during a conversation (Shellenbarger, 2013). This student also

²This student capitalizes “Autistic” in relation to their personal identity.

described that speech taught them how to conceal their autism, yet after making the decision to embrace their disorder and stop exhausting themselves, physically and mentally, in order to be accepted as *normal*, they are now consistently ranked poorly for eye contact. Focusing less on whether students maintain eye contact would be highly beneficial for both students with disabilities and students without disabilities.

Gestures. To this same point, gestures reflect assumptions as well. Requiring gestures assumes that students will be able-bodied. Expecting that all students will have controlled gestures assumes that all students have the ability to make them. Some entries from the rubrics include the need for “controlled bodily action” and “controlled gestures.” In some cases, this could seem as if people with disabilities need to “fix” their disability to make a high score on the assessment rubric.

Attire/Appearance. For professional attire/appearance and posture/poise, the focus is entirely off the speech and on the speaker themselves. This is problematic because “we live in a culture obsessed with physical looks,” and “research indicates that attraction correlates with grades and the teachers interact more with students considered attractive” (Powell & Powell, 2010, p.16). This category displayed more referent/expert language among all rubrics.

Posture/Poise. As discussed earlier, posture varies by person, yet culturally driven demands interpret posture as a means of goodwill (Gilman, 2014). Deep-rooted, inherent biases are also present within the public speaking assessment, with phrases such as the need for no “tapping or leaning on the podium” and “departs from the lectern without rushing.” Posture/poise varied in context categories with the language used. These examples are coercive context language because there is less room for flexibility and high restrictions.

Facial Expressions. The same Autistic forensic student mentioned earlier spoke to me about the difficulties they have with facial expressions as they had to learn nonverbals (i.e., what an angry face looked like). Although the rubrics overall landed more in the referent/expert context, there were still some rubrics in the other context categories. By assessing students on their facial expressions, there again is an assumption about what students can and cannot control. For facial expressions to be so influential on a speech’s assessment that they occupy a full section on assessment rubrics is problematic because it emphasizes the speaker rather than the speech, even though most courses focus on content and structure within the speechmaking process. It also poses the question of what are considered *good* facial expressions.

Movement. Assessing students for movement, again, may indicate ableist assumptions that students will have the same ability to move in the space freely. This

can exclude a large population within the disability community, as limited mobility is the most common type of disability and includes some 13.7% of disabled individuals (The Ability Institute, n.d.). This is not to say that movement is not possible for all disabled individuals, but it will clearly look different as “curricular goals for students with physical disabilities vary depending on the specific disability” (Powell & Powell, 2010, p. 101). Leading with the expectation that all students entering the course will have the ability to move during a speech could also discourage a student with disabilities from taking the course or discussing accommodations with the instructor since an assumption has already been made in favor of able-bodies. Some of the rubrics assess students on “foot control” and feet, which would obviously not translate well to all students, for example, students who are paralyzed or amputees.

Rate/Pitch/Volume/Vocal Variety. Rate/pitch/volume/vocal variety also carries the ableist assumption that these are controllable for all students. Some of the wording present in the analysis included the need for “vocal variation: monotone, minimal, average, good, exceptional” and a “smooth flow: jerky, uneven, stable, clearly planned, very smooth.” Points would be deducted for not displaying able-bodied speaking expectations.

Additional language included “correct articulation, pronunciation, grammar & word usage” and “no inappropriate language (crude, sexist, racist),” although sometimes inappropriate language can be a side effect of a disability, such as with Tourette Syndrome tics.

Vocalized Pauses. Vocalized pauses, or verbalized filler words (i.e., “um,” “uh,” “like,” “so,” etc.), were not present on every rubric. Some of the best orators did not fully eliminate vocalized pauses in their speeches. However, they can be increasingly present for students with disabilities who are facing ableist challenges. For example, Sir Ken Robinson can be heard saying “um” while trying to move on stage without the use of a cane during their TED talk, yet the vocalized pauses do not take away from how effective the speech is. Vocalized pauses can also be interpreted as a distraction, although some students struggle with this section more than others as some have less control over this.

Extemporaneous Style. Lastly, assessing students on an extemporaneous style is ableist against students with differing abilities. A person’s memory can be affected by disabilities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Remembering, which is a cognitive skill, can affect working memory. Memory can also affect remaining in the speech timeframe as well as rate/pace. A student might benefit from restarting their speech; however, most of the rubrics analyzed would not allow for this option.

One direct example of this includes the statement “not reading,” which could be difficult for some students with a disability. The same student mentioned earlier, who is Autistic, also explained to me how difficult the extemporaneous speaking style can be as this negatively impacts students who struggle to remember things due to their disorders (such as ADHD, autism, etc.), which in turn making them work significantly harder than neurotypical students for the same grades.

Discussion

Since student populations are increasingly becoming more diverse (Harrison & Myrick, 2020), assessment tools need to become more flexible to adapt to diverse student needs (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). Specifically, there is an increased need to focus on the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in higher education (Jensen et al., 2021). This analysis aimed to justify the argument that assessment tools used for the basic course tend to reflect ableist perspectives and assume that students taking the course will able-bodied individuals. This assumption complicates the likelihood that students with various or differing abilities succeed in the public speaking course. With the public speaking course being the “front porch” to the field (Beebe, 2013), it is important to reassess what exactly is being taught and expected out of students.

The most startling finding was that coercive context language was found to some degree in almost all rubrics. Instead of a flow in power, teachers command the power in coercive context rubrics even though “teachers should reduce the use of advice-sounding directives to help students better participate in the network of power flows” (Song, 2021, p. 418). Legitimate context language was also prominent but included the broadest range in interpretation of abilities. Observing the context differences in the delivery categories was interesting, as each category had at least one rubric with referent/expert context. This supports the contention that rubrics can have less ableist assumptions by using referent/expert context language. The three highest levels of coercive context in the delivery categories were rate/pitch/volume/vocal variety, gestures, and eye contact. The goal would be to examine how these categories can be re-described to include disability perspectives so as to make it a fair assessment category for all students.

The last thing to note is that categories other than delivery were also examined, but only when rubrics did not include the most common categories in the delivery section of the rubric. Those categories included total points, point scale, scale categories, time, page length, and number of sections. Higher overall points for the

assessment did appear to lead to more coercive context language. Rubrics that fit the referent/expert context the most had very low overall possible points. Some rubrics did not include any point value and or included large sections for comments.

Limitations and Future Directions

As noted earlier, some rubrics included wording that fit all context values, thus, making it difficult to determine one specific power context per individual rubric. Additionally, reward power was excluded from the analysis because it did not fit within the context values. Reward power is based on the premise that students believe that a teacher can provide something positive, such as a good grade. In the classroom, this could also be interpreted as bonus points or extra credit (Schrodt et al., 2008). In this analysis, reward power was not applicable based solely on the delivery sections of the rubrics. Also, when collecting the artifacts, a call for alternative rubrics used for specialized courses or for students who require accommodations was included, but no such rubrics were provided. This could mean that institutions alter rubrics on a case-by-case basis or that accommodations are rare. If no accommodations are being made, it should be questioned how many students are not taking the course based on the learning outcomes and assessment tools that measure those learning outcomes. This could be a wide student population missing out on the opportunity to take the public speaking course.

Future research could benefit from talking to instructors to determine how they use and apply rubrics. Future research can also include students' feedback and experiences by asking them about their engagement with assessment rubrics. This approach would allow for direct issues to be addressed and clear guidance for future adjustments to the public speaking course. A study that expands upon more than 30 rubrics and reviews undergraduate and graduate assessment tools could reveal valuable data. Also, expanding on the other sections of rubrics along with the assignment description and other course material could prove valuable for promoting changes needed for invisible disabilities. For example, cognitive disabilities often affect short-term and long-term memory and reading rates (Hatcher et al., 2002). By considering things such as time restrictions, notecards, memorization methods, etc., further ableism towards cognitive disabilities could be uncovered. Unfortunately, cognitive disabilities are more difficult to detect, and can vary from subtle to severe, but are often determined by self-reports (Lovett et al., 2015), thus,

making it increasingly difficult to critically analyze the inclusion and support of cognitive abilities within assessment rubrics.

Finally, considering how much autonomy instructors have over the basic course, rubrics should be constantly evaluated. If an instructor does not get to choose or create the rubric being used, they also have less power to transfer and share with their students and less of a chance to co-create meaning and expectations.

Recommendations

After carefully examining 30 public speaking rubrics, multiple recommendations for improvement come into focus. In general, changes to the standards of the basic course should be reevaluated, more training for instructors is needed, and there should be less emphasis on delivery that is focused on an assumption of students' abilities. Training for instructors could include being informed on how to work with diverse student populations and students with differing abilities. It is apparent that newer instructors and teaching assistants especially need more than just a handbook to read over when it comes to training (Young & Bippus, 2008). Furthermore, instructors realize that training is important (Aguirre et al., 2021). Without training, the success of students with disabilities depends on each instructor and their willingness (Aguirre et al., 2021), which could translate to abuse of power. Training could help to break the stigmatization of what an *effective* speaker is. De-emphasizing or restructuring the delivery sections in public speaking assessments would be more welcoming for students who might struggle more with physical disabilities. Additionally, instructors should assess students' prior knowledge and skills at the beginning of the course and look to instructional communication models to co-create meaning in the classroom. Many of the rubrics valued the delivery section from as much as 20%-50% of the total grade, thus further justifying the need for change. Additionally, partnering with various offices on campus, such as disabilities offices, can help facilitate student success.

Understanding the prior knowledge that students have before the course is crucial in higher education (Bowen, 2017). Meeting students where they are, paired with restructuring the public speaking curriculum and standards, can reestablish the purpose of the delivery section. For example, instructors look for eye contact as a way of connecting with the audience, showing confidence and so forth, but there are other ways to do this. Additionally, students should have more autonomy in public speaking courses, which relates directly to the power dynamics between instructor

and student and why considering power in the classroom is so important. Students and teachers should determine together what the assessment expectations are in order to have a clear understanding. Past research has shown that by including students in the assessment process, “students felt that their opinions were important, and they participated in the design of their own learning process” (Aguirre et al., 2021, 312). To implement this process, instructors need to be open and flexible to modifications (Aguirre et al., 2021). For example, perhaps a cohesive rubric that includes only the sections with referent/expert context might serve as an exemplar. Even with this change, however, an overarching need for changes to the foundations and course material being taught is still necessary for the basic course to be less ableist. There is a need to continue similar research to uncover more detailed responses and solutions to address the issues.

Conclusion

Communication faculty and administrators involved with the basic course need to reevaluate the assessment tools being used within public speaking courses to be more inclusive of differing abilities and include less ableism, and luckily, these conversations have begun. However, much more is necessary. Assessment rubrics display power dynamics that can affect student-teacher relationships. Rubrics that use coercive and legitimate power are more likely to be less effective in learning, and coercive and legitimate contexts rubrics made up 96.7% of all rubrics. Valuing teaching-student relationships and the flow of power will provide students with differing abilities with a better chance to succeed in the public speaking course, rather than setting them up for failure by leaving the course as is (Brockmann & Jeffress, 2017, p. 206), and can be beneficial for students without differing abilities as well. Additionally, not all students have had the access necessary to determine or document their disabilities, so that co-creating meaning with each individual student is essential to success for all students taking public speaking. Instructors who value students and can express that in the classroom are more successful at creating a space that empowers them (Kirk et al., 2016). As a public speaking instructor, I have talked with students with disabilities about how much of a struggle these standards can be and the anxiety that is caused by knowing that at the onset of the speech, your body is being negatively judged. Students who feel empowered by their instructor also “reported better grades, fewer behavioral incidents, increased extracurricular participation, and higher educational aspirations than students who were less empowered” (Kirk et al., 2016, p. 589). Basic course facilitators should revise

traditional assessment tools to reflect referent and expert power, thereby complementing instructional communication theory.

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