



Jamieson Met the Beebes Long Ago: *Public Speaking: An Audience-Centered Approach*

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When, in his July 2000 Communication Education article, Todd Frobish described our textbook, *Public Speaking: An Audience-Centered Approach*, variously as “peripheral” and “non-mainstream,” we found it difficult at first to focus on his message. We perceive our book to offer the best of both classic and contemporary “mainstream” principles and strategies; and our adoption list provides evidence that we are not “peripheral.” However, the text itself reminded us that “heightened emotions can affect your ability to understand a message” (63). So we calmed down, read more carefully, and began to think critically about Frobish’s analysis of the extent to which contemporary public-speaking texts take into account current rhetorical theory--specifically, Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s 1988 analysis of *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*. Now we find ourselves with a welcome opportunity to join the discussion.

Our book actually fares better than most of the other texts Frobish considers; he discovers in it “evidence of an attempt to represent a more accurate view of the modern rhetorical situation” (250). Actually, more evidence exists than Frobish acknowledges. This venue gives us, first of all, a chance to point out that additional evidence. Second, we will contend that Jamieson’s paradigm of modern eloquence has only limited application to public-speaking pedagogy. And finally, we will suggest--as does Jamieson--that speech pedagogy actually offers the best hope for creating speeches that “mesh the best of the old and the new” (246).

First, *Public Speaking: An Audience-Centered Approach* presents an even more “accurate view” of the modern rhetorical paradigm than Frobish recognizes or discloses. For example, Jamieson describes modern public speaking as “a collaborative and intimate act that enmeshes speaker and audience” (45). We agree and offer students a contemporary transactive model of communication in the opening pages of our book. Jamieson goes on to explain how contemporary audiences’ expectations for visual, conversational, personalized, and self-disclosive speeches have in large part forged the new eloquence. Again, we agree. “In a very real sense,” we tell students, “your audience ‘writes’ the speech” (25). We develop a widely acclaimed audience-centered public-speaking model that places “consider the audience” at the center of all decisions that a speaker must make. We show students how to apply this model by repeatedly emphasizing and explaining how they should consider the knowledge and expectations of their audiences during each stage of preparing and delivering their speeches.

The specific advice we offer for many of these stages is also congruent with Jamieson’s observations about modern eloquence. Although Frobish claims that we say little about “the use of narratives or self-disclosure to form messages for an audience conditioned to expect them” (249), in fact, we consider this issue many times. “*Everybody likes to hear a story*. If you remember nothing else from this chapter, remember that one principle” (165), we tell students at the opening of our chapter on supporting material. And several pages later, we urge them to “remember that the best illustrations are personal ones” (167). In this same chapter, we echo Jamieson’s observation that “leaps from the single anecdote or personal experience to the general claim are sound only if [the] anecdote is accurate, typical, and representative of a larger universe of experiences” (245). We tell students, “the illustrations you choose should represent a trend” and remind them to “use audience-centered illustrations--ones with which the members of your audience can relate”

(167).

Another element critical to Jamieson's theory of modern eloquence is the emphasis on the visual. Frobish searches for evidence of similar emphasis in our text in an appendix on visual aids and in our chapter on language and style. But at least in the first instance, he was looking in the wrong place. What Jamieson is really talking about is not a visual aid, but what she calls a "visual-verbal statement" (115) or a "synoptic snapshot" (134)--in other words, the translation of a visual image into words. Had Frobish looked in our chapter on speaking to inform, he would have found the following discussion:

A major event can form the basis of a fascinating informative speech. . . . Your goal is to describe the event in concrete, tangible terms. . . . your purpose as an informative speaker describing an event is to make that event come alive for your listeners and to help them visualize the scene. (337)

And just a few pages later, we offer detailed suggestions for constructing effective word pictures, "lively descriptions that help your listeners form a mental image" (341). Surely such instruction, combined with the evidence Frobish acknowledges from our chapter on language style, offers more than the "glimmer of hope" (249) he sees in our acknowledgement of the modern rhetorical situation.

Although our work acknowledges the reality of the new eloquence, is such acknowledgment tantamount to *teaching* it? Would Jamieson herself advocate that we do so? The answer to both questions is "No." Jamieson's work is one of historical criticism--an analysis of a rhetorical phenomenon that exists (or existed in the mid 1980s), but is far from ideal. The very eloquence Jamieson describes, she in many ways deplors. She contrasts with the "golden ages" of rhetoric (11) the tendencies of contemporary speakers to draw "simplistic and often false dichotomies" (11), to "argue by hitting and running" (11), and to replace dramatically illustrated argument with "dramatically bodied assertion" (13). She decries the "divorce between knowledgeable thought and the speech act" (27) in the manuscript speeches prepared by speechwriters and read by others. In her analysis of Ronald Reagan's eloquence, Jamieson recognizes that "his ideas are unoriginal, his language often pedestrian, the structure of his speeches at time haphazard" (136); she points out his routine "factual and statistical errors" (244). Surely no one, least of all Jamieson herself, would suggest that the Academy advocate such strategies to its students.

In fact, it is the Academy--and its textbooks--that remain our best hope for countering some of the superficiality of the modern eloquence. Jamieson thinks so. "History tells us," she writes, "that a suitable education and adequate practice will facilitate the production of eloquence" (16). Surely it is the public-speaking course, the public-speaking teacher, and the public-speaking text that offer such education and practice, and that hold promise for a more eloquent eloquence.

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