



Speechmaking, Pedagogy, and Civic Responsibility

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Much like the introductory composition course in English departments, public speaking is the primary locus of contact for undergraduates in communication departments, as well as a major source of funding for graduate programs. It is imperative, therefore, that we do all we can to ensure that the course is taught with integrity and fulfills the needs of the students who take it and the departments and other units on campus that require it. An important element in this process is reflection on the pedagogy and textbooks employed in the course. As the author of *The Art of Public Speaking* and as a faculty member who has worked with the public speaking course for close to three decades, I know how much effort I--like other authors and course directors--put into keeping up with current developments in research and pedagogy.

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It was thus with considerable interest that I read Todd Frobish's "Jamieson Meets Lucas: Eloquence and Pedagogical Model(s) in *The Art of Public Speaking*" in the July 2000 issue of *Communication Education*. While Frobish undertakes the useful task of raising questions about the objects and methods of instruction in the public speaking course, I have serious reservations both about his characterization of present practices and his recommendations for future pedagogy.

Let me begin with Frobish's claim, articulated in the opening sentence of his essay, that "The current state of speech pedagogy does not fully reflect modern theory and research" (239). Taken at face value, the claim is doubtless true, but it constitutes a straw figure and, in that sense, stands as a synecdoche for much of the essay as a whole. It is a straw figure because no introductory public speaking course or textbook can "fully reflect" the rich, complex, and multifarious body of contemporary theory and research in areas as diverse as rhetoric, listening, ethics, language, argument, persuasion, and speech performance. Indeed, it is fair to say that even advanced courses and textbooks struggle to "fully reflect" all the dimensions of research and theory in their subjects. The proper question with regard to the introductory public speaking course and the textbooks used in it is not whether they provide complete coverage of current theory and research, but whether they provide sufficient coverage for students and teachers to achieve their objectives in the course.

From the first edition of *The Art of Public Speaking*, I have made sure it is firmly grounded in classical rhetorical theory and current communication research. There is certainly room for debate as to how much of that theory and research should be made explicit in the book and how much should be reserved for endnotes and bibliographical references. My own view is that first- and second-year students, who constitute the bulk of the audience for introductory textbooks, do not need extended discussion of specific research studies in order to improve their communication skills. They do, however, need to know that the principles of effective discourse presented in their books are based on careful consideration of the relevant research. Thus I often refer to that research in the text while providing specific citations in the chapter endnotes. For each chapter I also provide a bibliography of additional readings in the instructor's manual for teachers who wish to explore those readings for their own benefit or to assign them for their students. While Frobish describes his ideal textbook as one that would incorporate substantial explication of research studies into "the text itself" (251), rather than in bibliographies or endnotes, there are strong pedagogical reasons for eschewing that direction.

As it turns out, however, Frobish does not attend in his essay to the broad sweep of communication theory

and research. Rather, he fastens on one work--Kathleen Jamieson's *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (1988), which demonstrates how American political discourse has changed from the kind of traditional oratory practiced before the twentieth century. Today's political messages, Jamieson holds, reveal the pervasive impact of television, are predominantly conversational in tone, and privilege personal narratives and visual modes of persuasion over sustained arguments and well-documented claims. Rather than lauding these traits, however, Jamieson laments them. In her view, much current political communication is intellectually impoverished and ethically suspect, thereby lending credence to Kant's condemnation of rhetoric as "the art of deluding by means of fair semblance" and too often confirming "Plato's concern that rhetoric can artfully make the untrue appear true" (240).

As Jamieson makes clear, this is not the kind of speechmaking we want to inculcate in our students. Moreover, contrary to Frobish's declaration, Jamieson does not show "how current pedagogical practices fail to consider the contemporary rhetorical situation and its predominant medium of communication, the television" (240). Other than passing references, Jamieson turns to pedagogy in only two places. The first is in her opening chapter, which includes a section explaining how the education system's inattention to oratory and the rhetorical arts in general has contributed to the decline of traditional eloquence. The second is in her final chapter, where she sketches how restoring the study and praxis of speeches to a central role in the curriculum would contribute to the creation of "a political world bent on increasing the thoughtful speechmaking in presidential campaigns and in the presidency itself" (250). In an ideal world, she says, educators would "make possible both enthymemes and enlightened discourse" by considering "the recommendations of those who see ways to increase both visual and verbal literacy. Our schools would teach students to recognize and reject faulty premises, data, and claims, whether visual or verbal" (253).

These are all worthy objectives that, with the exception of teaching visual literacy, have long been part of public speaking instruction in American colleges and universities. Although Frobish does not advocate that we take on the burden of providing instruction in visual literacy, he does urge greater attention to speechmaking that privileges narrative, visual, and self-disclosive modes of communication. Because his remarks about this aspect of *The Art of Public Speaking* are based on the fifth edition, which has since been surpassed by both the sixth and seventh editions, there is little point in pursuing the subject in detail here. A few brief comments, however, are in order.

In keeping with technological developments and the sensibilities of contemporary audiences, *The Art of Public Speaking* gives substantial attention to visual methods of support, including the visual dimensions of language and the speaker's use of visual aids. It also provides multiple speech excerpts, as well as several complete sample speeches, that exemplify the use of narratives and autobiographical material by student speakers and public figures alike. Frobish is concerned that I treat narrative as a mode of support rather than as the central paradigm in speechmaking, but while narratives doubtless possess considerable rhetorical power, so too do statistics and testimony. Rather than being exposed preeminently to narrative theory, students need to learn the full range of supporting materials. They also need to understand that deciding which to use in support of a given claim is a rhetorical choice that depends on the speaker's topic, purpose, and audience. To give precedence to narratives because they are often used by political speakers in televised appeals would run the danger of leaving students unprepared for the broad spectrum of rhetorical situations they will face in their careers and communities.

Throughout *The Art of Public Speaking*, Frobish says, one finds "a particular focus on organization, argument and its support, and the practicality of the [speaker's] appeals and goals" (246). "Apparently," he says, "Lucas favors statistics and examples, organization, logic, arrangement, Aristotelian proofs, the grand style of language, practical knowledge, and such things as conciseness and clarity" (249). Indeed, I do. If we are to have any hope of invigorating the intellectual integrity of political speech and improving the ability of citizens to think critically and skillfully about public discourse, we must continue to give close attention to such matters as organization, logic, argument, and clarity. As I have stated in every edition of *The Art of Public Speaking*, a book intended for students who want to speak more effectively should never lose sight of the fact that the most important part of speaking is thinking. The ability to think critically is vital to a world in which personality and image too often substitute for thought and substance. While Frobish emphasizes those elements of contemporary political rhetoric that, as Jamieson demonstrates, often work to undermine well-supported claims by speakers and critical engagement by listeners, I believe we do our students--and society--a far greater service by developing their skills of substantive thought, logical analysis, and informed judgment.

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