



Rhetorical Culture and the Basic Course

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I am pleased to discuss the relationship between public-speaking pedagogy and contemporary televisual speechmaking as highlighted in Todd Frobish's "Jamieson Meets Lucas: Eloquence and Pedagogical Model(s) in *The Art of Public Speaking*."

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Believing that the cultural content of public-speaking education often is barren or confused, I am attracted to Frobish's probing of the origins and assumptions of textbook practices. Clearly he is onto something when he observes the cultural disconnect reflected in students' puzzling over why exemplars of recent eloquence fail to conform to the textbook format of introduction/three points/conclusion. While I concur with his interest in marrying old and new practices (Frobish, 2000, p. 251), I confess to an unease about his more expansive intimations that public-speaking instruction should "embody" that form of mass-mediated eloquence ("effeminate style") to which contemporary TV audiences have become adjusted (p. 245).

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In my own *Speechmaking: Rhetorical Competence in a Postmodern World* (1997a), I survey certain historical and cultural resources available to current speakers, tools derived variously from ancient oral practices and the twentieth-century "plain speech" movement. (This chapter is available separately as *The Heritage of Rhetorical Theory* [1997b].) Here I argue that much of the specific advice in speech textbooks dates from the 1920s when the field abandoned the oratorical framework in favor of basing instruction on the model of the short business talk. Because the "I Have a Dream" speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. matches almost perfectly the Ciceronian organizational pattern (exordium, narration, partition, confirmation, refutation, digression, peroration), I find it congenial to juxtapose Cicero's sequence to the plain-speech format of preview, three points, and conclusion (Sproule, 1997a, pp. 199-209). At the same time, when our attention turns from great contemporary oratory to student speeches, our needs are equally well met by the familiar speech-outline method. What this suggests is that, by gleaning from the historical and cultural legacy of rhetoric, we can offer our students a useful range of approaches to meet whatever is their particular need.

Working from the resources model of public-speaking education, I could not agree more with the idea of taking speech instruction beyond the narrow cultural confines of the short point-by-point business talk. However, even granting Frobish's argument that textbooks too often slight the rhetorical value of narrative, self-disclosure, and visual communication, I doubt that the answer is to wrench speech from the oratorical past and the plain-talk present in favor of the supermediated future. Wholehearted pursuit of a TV model of address might produce maladroit speaking in the same way that the efforts of automakers in the 1950s to appropriate the look of the space age resulted in cars with prominent, but extraneous, fins.

In reassessing the pedagogy of speech, we might do well to consider public speaking *as a medium* and to emphasize what our students need vis-à-vis this medium. Public speaking once was exclusively a mode of direct, face-to-face address and, as reflected in the classroom setting, it continues to be so. Although speeches can be presented via TV or computer, the instructional imperative of public speaking *as speaking* continues to be success in face-to-face communion with others. What does a student need in regard to such a medium? Thirty years experience in teaching speech convinces me that students want advice and practice that will help them succeed *in front of others*. From this perspective, the three-point approach to

organization can be as helpful as an emphasis on narration--depending upon the type of speech, proclivities of speaker, number of listeners, time available, and expectations of the audience. Now it is true that speaking for television (or radio) brings to the fore certain special considerations attending to a remote and unseen audience; but should such particular vicissitudes govern Speech 101? Perhaps not; for if Jamieson is correct that TV--and overly Powerpointed speakers--function chiefly to provide captions to the accompanying pictures (Jamieson, 1988, p. 57), then we are on strong grounds to assume that students will need more than skills in verbal headlining. Our students are likely to find themselves in exactly the position of Bill Clinton, Ross Perot and George Bush when, during one 1992 debate appearance, the trio took questions from a selected lay audience rather than from journalists. The popular audience had little patience with bumper-sticker-quality reasoning and sloganistic pandering to hot-button issues. Audience members asked pointed questions about matters that affected everyday life--and expected substantive answers.

Where Frobish invites us to interrogate the cultural sources of speech education, where he advises adding more attention to narrative, self-disclosure and visual communication, I am most favorably disposed to his project. Where the objective becomes revolutionary rather than evolutionary, I am more skeptical. Giving students the most "accurate view of the rhetorical environment" (Frobish, 2000, p. 251) requires that we, on the one hand, help them conceive of face-to-face (extemporaneous) address as a medium and, on the other, help them plan strategies for this mode of speech. Specialized mass-media-embodying instruction would be most suitable for those students who are wont to focus on particularized contexts such as speaking on radio, speaking on TV, and conducting Powerpoint talks.

Whither public-speaking education? I agree with Frobish that our pedagogy must be sensitive to culture and media. My own take on this imperative is to view public speaking as itself a medium and, from this perspective, garner appropriate and useful cultural resources whether past, present, or future.

References

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