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FIRST DAY OF PUBLIC SPEAKING CLASS AND STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

BY OLI MOHAMMADI, PHD AND CRYSTAL LANE SWIFT, PHD

Because it has made its way into the general requirements of most institutions, and is listed as one of the most desired skills by employers, the introductory public speaking course has come to hold a truly unique space within the college curriculum. Since public speaking is generally exempt from the demand of prerequisites, and not a member of a series of courses, students can register across all four years of progress in their college careers, and may stem from a wide variety of majors. With this diversity, it is safe to say that

“The data suggests that students respond favorably when the instructor delivers information that the students deem, indeed, meaningful.”

Public Speaking covers a wide variety of interests and goals.

Public Speaking is unique in other ways. It is an embodied experience and dialogic encounter. It is a class that, by its very essence, requires the participation of the whole person.

As the course name suggests, students spend a substantial amount of classroom time on their feet, in front of their peers, speaking. This part of the course requirements literally has them enacting the instructor role. Students become the center of the class’s attention, as they teach and demonstrate during informative speeches, argue and move to action during persuasive speeches. Students are graded on the integration of mind and body. Not only are they judged on content (i.e. sources cited, arguments sound, information credible), but also on how they execute the message (i.e. use of voice, gestures, posture at podium).

What makes Public Speaking even more unique is that a substantial portion of the students have never spoken or performed in front of a formal audience, and broadly lack familiarity with public speaking as a medium. In fact, this lack of experience is often self-imposed. Many students are so frightened of public speaking that they put off the course until it is no longer avoidable. Other students fail the course once or twice, because they give up early in the term.

The combination of agency, newness, and inexperience generates levels of anxiety and apprehension within the student body. As suggested by uncertainty reduction theory, communicators are less comfortable in unpredictable or unfamiliar contexts. On the first day of class, it is typical to see hands fly, eyes open wide, and foreheads furrow as speech assignments are reviewed and expectations laid out. Students nervously ask: “WHAT do we have to do?!” “*How many* minutes do we have to

stand in front of the class?” “*How many* times do we have to be in front of the class alone?” “What if we have never done this before?” “What if we freak out?” and the more than occasional, “*Do I have to?*”

Literature Review

Interestingly, while the content of these first day questions are unique to Public Speaking, the purpose behind them is rather typical across curricula. West and Pearson (1994) identified six first day question categories: classroom procedures, general inquiry/content, clarification, confirmation, general inquiry/instructor, and unknown/other. The most common student question/ instructor comment combination found was the classroom procedures question and the instructor’s clarification comments. Harry K. Wong (2009) suggested that there were seven questions each student had on the first day: (a) Am I in the right room? (b) Where am I supposed to sit? (c) What are the rules in this classroom? (d) What will I be doing? (e) How will I be graded? (f) Who is the instructor? and (g) Will the instructor treat me as a human being?

In *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner discussed the expectations of repeated behaviors in specific situations and rituals. Referring to them as restorative behavior, he argued that people repeatedly enact behaviors. He described the repetition as “me behaving as if I am someone else” and “me in another state of feeling/being,” as if there were multiple “me’s” in each person (p. 4). The importance of repeating behaviors is the maintenance of a feedback loop, one in which the repetition leads to a desired result.

Given its importance, a great deal of research has focused on instructor behavior and its effectiveness on student’s academic experiences and student success. We found that scholars from across disciplines have noted that what an instructor says and does in the classroom on the first day can impact student motivation, as well as student cognitive and affective learning (ie. McCroskey, Richmond, Sallinen, Fayer, and Barraclough, 1995; Frymier, 1994; Nussbaum, 1992; Bergem 1990). Studies have suggested that how effectively students perceive an instructor enacting in his or her role will influence student perceptions of the classroom and their own success more than what an instructor actually does.

Rohrkemper (1984) examined the role of the classroom instructor as a socializing agent by viewing the relationship of instructor socialization style to student perceptions and behaviors, concluding that instructor socialization style (inductive or deductive) can be a strong influence on the social cognition and interpersonal behavior of students. Civikly (1992) demonstrated that students are neither passive nor empty vessels into which instructors pour knowledge; rather, they are actively engaged in constructing their perceptions and interpretations of the instructor’s signals about learning (Bell, 2002; Potter, 2001; Delgado and Stefancic, 1997; Bass, 1990). Similarly, feminist studies have emphasized the transformation of passive recipients of knowledge into knowers who see themselves as agents of social change. (Ayers-Nachamkin, 1992; Bailey, 2001; Cooks, 2001; Cornell, 1998; Currie, 1992; Eberly, 2000; Galanes, Adams, & Brillhart, 2004; Griffin, 2003; Hendrix, 2000; hooks, 1994; Lederman, 2001; Sandall, 1991; White, 1994).

Rather than focusing on regurgitation of stored information, feminist pedagogy puts learning into action. Feminist based practices have taken the relationship between representation and student agency from within the confines of a rigid and narrowly defined tradition, and address multilayered constructions and deployments. As set forth by Armstrong and Juhl (2007):

Conscious of how power relations inform and shape the classroom, feminist pedagogies... construct communities where knowledge emerges through our encounters, and especially through our confrontations, with one another. (p. 7)

Performance Studies has also provided useful theoretical frameworks from which to understand perceived instructor behavior and student perception. Performance studies have given self-reflexive attention to how students are physically active within the classroom (Pineau, 2002; Conquergood, 1993). Students have been privileged as individuals whose experiencing bodies are situated in time, place, and history (Denzin, 2003; Freire, 1993; Conquergood 1991; Jameson, 1981). As argued by Gómez-Peña (2005):

If I could only turn the classroom or workshop-studio into a performance rehearsal space...and utilize my performance techniques to teach, I may be able to find a temporary utopian space within an educational context. ... It could become an extension of both the performance space and the social world, a kind of demilitarized zone and nerve center for progressive thought and action (p. 96).

The classroom can indeed be a performative, laboratory space for students, and the behaviors of both the students and the instructor on the first day of the public speaking course need to make the possible space for this type of activity.

Methods

Participants

This project used two large data pool sets. A total of 270 students participated. The first pool consisted of 120 students enrolled in an Introductory Public Speaking class at a large Southern university. The remaining 150 students were gathered at a large Southern California community college. The two pools represented 28 majors with the distribution being freshman (36%), sophomore (24%), junior (15%), and senior (25%). Of these students, 61% were female and 39% male.

Procedures

Open-ended surveys were used to generate a list of behaviors students expected of their instructors on the first day of Public Speaking class, and what they believed was expected of them in return. Surveys were administered to volunteer participants at the start of the first day by a student aid, who was used to minimize contamination and maintain generalizations, because it was believed that students might give different answers after having seen or met the instructor. Twenty-seven students who reported previous experience with the instructor, and/or reported they had taken a previous Public Speaking course were excluded from the study. Two-hundred forty-three total responses were used.

The questions: (a) “What should an instructor do on the first day of Public Speaking class?” (b) “What do students do the first day of Public Speaking class?” and (c) “What things would make the first day of class terrible?” were asked on the first questionnaire. The list of behaviors generated by the students was grouped, and the groupings were sent to two independent colleagues for cross-referencing before a final list was generated.

One class was administered a second questionnaire. This asked the questions: “What has this instructor done well on this first day of Public Speaking class?” and “What could have the instructor done to improve the first day of Public Speaking class?” Students were asked to evaluate the instructor and their own participation during the class period.

Results

Questionnaire 1. “What should an instructor do on the first day of Public Speaking class?” generated seven categories of responses from students. These categories were rather evenly distributed, with nearly 100% of the students listing Organizational (99%), Clarification (97%) and Instructional (96%). Sixty-three percent listed Social, 54% Attitudinal, and 17% Physical.

Emergent Category	What should an instructor do on the first day of Public Speaking class?”	Responds	Percent
Organizational	Hand out syllabus. Take roll.	241	.99
Clarification	Answer questions. Clear up confusion.	236	.97
Instructional	Lecture. Give notes. Tell us what we need. Give us the name of the textbook.	234	.96
Social	Learn names. Ask for feedback. Assign groups. Introduce self.	153	.63
Attitudinal	Act mean. Appear nice. Share how they feel.	131	.54
Physical	Walk in. Sit down. Write on board. Stand in front of class.	41	.17

For the second question, “What do students do the first day of Public Speaking class?” a range of statements emerged within the same seven categories, but as pertinent to the student role. For example, “Get out my notes” (Physical); “Say ‘Hi’ to the person sitting next to me” (Social); “Look interested” (Attitudinal); “Get syllabus” (Organizational); and “Ask questions about absences” (Clarification). Within these seven categories, 93% of the students listed some kind of physical act for “expected first day behavior.” The category of Social received 61% of the generated responses, 42% reported Attitudinal expectations, 87% Organizational, and 32% cited Clarification as a behavior expected from the student body on the first day of class.

Emergent Category	“What do students do the first day of Public Speaking class?”	Responds	Percent
Organizational	Get syllabus. See when tests are.	211	.87
Clarification	Ask questions.	78	.32
Social	Learn names. Ask for feedback, Assign groups. Introduce self.	148	.61
Attitudinal	Look interested. Try and care. See if this is going to be fun.	102	.42
Physical	Walk in, Sit down. Get out my notes.	153	.93

“What things would make the first day of class terrible?” resulted in 84% of students giving remarks that were categorized within Physical (Have to stand up and give a speech). Sixty-one percent responded in the category of Instructional (Lecture the entire class period. Have to take a test). Fifty-two percent gave answers that fell under the category of Organizational (Nothing was explained. Syllabus was not reviewed). Thirty-seven of students indicated that their worst imaginable first day of class comprised of an instructor whose attributes included “pushy,” “mean,” “rigid,” “bossy,” and “non-caring.” These responses were categorized under the category of Attitudinal. Only 3% reported in the Social category (Get into groups. Introduce myself) as being the worst day imaginable.

Emergent Category	“What things would make the first day of class terrible?”	Responds	Percent
Organizational	Nothing is explained. Syllabus is not reviewed.	126	.52
Instructional	Lecture the entire class period. Have to take a test.	148	.61
Social	Get into groups. Introduce myself.	7	.03
Attitudinal	Get a pushy, mean, bossy instructor.	90	.37
Physical	Have to stand up and give a speech.	204	.84

Questionnaire 2. “What has this instructor done well on this first day of Public Speaking class?” generated four of the previous categories and one new: Meaningfulness (applied this class outside world/job market); Clarity (things were made clear, easy to understand); Organizational (told us when things were due); and Attitudinal (Instructor was funny, easy going, laid back)

Eighty-four percent answered in the category of Meaningfulness, 46% of the responses fell in the category of Clarity, 45% responded Organizational, and 36% Attitudinal.

Emergent Category	“What has this instructor done well on this first day of Public Speaking class?”	Responds	Percent
Meaningfulness	Applied this class outside world/job market.	204	.84
Clarity	Things were made clear.	112	.46
Organizational	Told us when things were due.	109	.45
Attitudinal	Instructor was funny, easy going, laid back.	87	.36

For the second question, “What can the instructor do to improve this class?” the categories that emerged were: Organizational (Give more time for speeches, more time between assignments). Evaluative (Lower expectations), Clarity (Make syllabus clearer, give more detail), Attitudinal (Be more understanding of students, be nicer). Thirty-nine percent of the student’s responses were Organizational, 28% within the new category of Evaluative, 21% gave answers dealing with Clarity, and 13% of the responses indicated Attitudinal.

Emergent Category	“What can the instructor do to improve this class?”	Responds	Percent
Organizational	Give more time for speeches, more time between assignments.	95	.39
Evaluative	Lower expectations.	204	.84
Clarity	Make syllabus clearer, give more detail.	51	.21
Attitudinal	Be more understanding of students, be nicer.	87	.36

Discussion

As Richmond and Roach (1992) explained, students expect an instructor to be “responsible for presenting subject content, explaining difficult concepts, modeling and stimulating problem-solving skills, promoting both cognitive and affective learning in students, motivating students toward academic achievement, and providing an environment conducive to learning” (p. 58). Most of the responses students gave to the question fell in line with these expectations.

Organization, Clarity, Attitude, and Instruction ranked within the range of the 90th percentile for what students expected from an instructor on the first day of Public Speaking class. Students expressed they wanted the instructor to deliver information in a clear manner with a good attitude. In fact, their answers indicated that although Public Speaking is a unique course, they still expect of the first day of class to establish the general feel, one often attributed to traditional pedagogy that falls under the “banking-model” of education.

In the “banking-model,” instructors are perceived as a means to completing the class and are pictured as informational, almost disembodied machines (Freire, 1993; Hooks, 1994). Students are essentially clients to be served. It is the instructor’s responsibility to be sure that students fully understand and have enough time for assignments. Students take in information and regurgitate back the information on the instructor’s demand, and if a student does not do well on an assignment, the instructor is held responsible for failing to be clear and organized.

Within this model of education, instructors who are clear are favorable to the students, because understanding is necessary to them in order to complete the tasks of the course. As suggested by our results, getting an instructor with a good attitude is important, because they are ‘stuck’ with this instructor for the duration of the semester and a ‘nice instructor’ is perceived as more likely to give an ‘A’ grade.

Within the space of expected findings, we also had some surprising results. Ninety-three percent of the participants listed some kind of physical act as “expected first day behavior” from teachers, and 84% of students gave remarks that were categorized within Physical when referring to the worst day of class. In fact, Physical outscored every other category. Perhaps more even more intriguing was that students expressed both the physical mechanics involved with the first day of class (sit down, get out pen), but also the lived experience and their emotive responses to this experience. One student wrote, “I walk into the classroom and the desks look so horrible to me. You are crammed into a 2-foot wide wooden box. Concentrating is difficult because you are thinking about how uncomfortable you are.” Another wrote, “I walk into class and am having a bad hair day and (I) squeeze my butt into the desk, pull out my supplies, and try to pretend I am listening, but really wish I was sleeping.”

This detailing of how students were “really” feeling as they negotiated and inhabited a place within the classroom culture carried deeply intra- and interpersonal qualities. This is in agreement with Goffman’s (1959) deduction, “that access to the back and front regions of a performance is controlled not only by performers but by others” (p. 229). On the first day of Public Speaking class, this negotiation of self is actively at play. In expressing how their bodies were functioning, students were self-disclosing. Interestingly, while the embodied experience of class participants is not normally discussed in classrooms on an interpersonal level, it is always mentioned on the mass communication level, in that it appears in Public Speaking lectures. Often occurring during first weeks of class, physiological and psychological “noise” are taught as the major descriptive components of the transactional model of communication; students are taught that how an audience member is feeling mentally and physically (e.g. hungry, tired, uncomfortable) can interfere, obscure, or even obliterate the communication context.

Alongside Physical there was another surprising find. Despite the fact that most of the results suggest that students feel that their instructor and his/her instruction is just a means to the end of a particular requirement, an emergent category in the question about what the instructor had done well was *meaningfulness*. “The data suggests that students respond favorably when the instructor delivers information that the students deem, indeed, *meaningful*.” It seems that regardless of their other

attitudes, students still appreciate instructors who provide skills, information, and activities that they deem *meaningful*. Responses showed that students were appreciative of a learning environment that extended beyond the “A” grade and passed through the confines of the class itself; students appreciated information they could take with them as they moved forward with their lives.

Interestingly, this is another lesson taught in Public Speaking courses, but not discussed within the microclimate of the course itself. Students are told to adapt their speeches to their audience, keeping their interests in mind, and telling the audience why the speech matters to them. Furthermore, students are taught that the better you can adapt a speech, the higher your credibility will be evaluated by the audience.

In this sense, instructors and students are in a reciprocal relationship, each exerting an effect upon the other in aspects that reach beyond the academic walls; schooling is a social and emotional process larger than the intellectualism of the class. The notion of meaningful parallels the general goals students have when choosing to attend college. As Cheseboro and Worley (2000) pointed out, the “communication course frequently serves as an excellent environment to foster individual techniques for adapting to the college environment” (p. 36). And in fact, when asked “Why did you come to college?” students often express their desires as “to live life,” “to discover myself,” “to experience new people,” “really get a feel for what is out there,” and “feel freedom and grow.”

Conclusions

Teaching is about establishing effective and affective communication relationships with students. Even though most students enrolled in Public Speaking courses do so to complete their general education, and are primarily concerned with garnering clear, organized information for success on the first day of class, they also aware of the embodied experience of the classroom. We, as instructors, must focus on their awareness and continue to develop innovative Public Speaking first day curricula.

We can begin encouraging our students to use their bodies as sites of knowledge and modes of inquiry. This reshaping of the classroom space can help alleviate students’ anxieties and their apprehensions of Public Speaking. From this approach, instead of having their bodies held captive or put on display, they instead become a medium for learning and processing.

Students in this study surprisingly noted that they prefer when information is shared through what they consider to be a meaningful manner. Perhaps we are a bit jaded by some of the students we have encountered in the past, who simply expected that information be delivered in such a way that they could simply “ace” the class and get out of there. In contrast, the students in the present study seemed genuinely happy to receive useful, meaningful information. When our results are read together, it is safe to conclude that the students we studied are interested in a clear, organized, social classroom in which the instructor has a good attitude while instructing, and where the course information and activities are meaningful in addition to addressing the physical attributes of the student.

There currently exists such a method of teaching in the public speaking class. Marc T. Newman developed a method in which students give ten to fifteen extemporaneous public speeches instead of the traditional four to five, sometimes read, sometimes memorized. In support of the need for performative repetition in the classroom, Kilgard (2011) argues, “I maintain that there is no substitute for, and no quick road through the rich, complex knowledge that develops through years of reflexive engagement of bodies in space and time” (p. 218). This repetition, of course, may seem chaotic, but Hayles (1991) explains that “Chaos . . . denotes not true randomness but the orderly disorder characteristic of these systems.” (p. 1, emphasis added). This chaos is a necessary first step in the process of Goulish’s (2000) call to “discover our approach.”

This small group approach is an integral part of the meaningfulness of Irvine Valley Project, and of maintaining a progressive performative pedagogical classroom. As put by Armstrong and Juhl, “[b]y working as both insider and outsider to the community, and by encouraging vulnerability, disclosure, and resistance in her role as witness, the feminist instructor becomes a kind of agent provocateur or trickster who utilizes classroom dynamics” (p. 14). The repetition of peer critique in small groups transforms oral critique from intimidating to mundane. This “tricks” the students to change from resistant to receptive to helpful response from peers. Brazile reminds us that “[t]eachable moments are precisely when public performances go awry; it is only in the context of these disrupted performances that critical questions about those everyday ways of acting, thinking, being on stage can be questioned and challenged” (p. 146). In the words of the Irvine Valley Project’s biggest supporter, Professor Gary Rybold (2010), “Providing an activity-based pedagogical environment requires students to actively engage the material during every class session.” (p. 35). One of Rybold’s colleagues, Professor April Griffin (2010) agrees, “This new avenue of teaching public speaking also provides instructors with the opportunity to focus on student development and step into the role of mentor rather than grader” (p. 11). Students who experience this particular format of the public speaking class voice their performances through multiple layers: speeches, critiques of other speeches, and responses to critiques. The class is able to speak in an environment where even what constitutes a mistake is constantly negotiated.

As instructors we face increasingly diverse classrooms and must be prepared for a broader spectrum of student behavior. Pineau (2002) calls the most expansive education one in which the classrooms become sites in which educators seek to break the cycle of domination and oppression. Moving directly into the classroom, Pineau supports the ‘decentering of instructor authority,’ and the facilitation of interactive and peer-oriented learning. She notes that critical educators believe that intervention is needed (the language of critique), renewal is possible (the language of possibility), and that educators are responsible for enacting both at every level of the profession (the commitment to action). By expanding the definitions of pedagogy, we move beyond a limited emphasis on the mastery of techniques and methodologies, enabling students to understand pedagogy as a configuration of textual, verbal, and visual practices that seek to engage the process through which people understand themselves.

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