

PUBLIC SPEAKING

A Transactional Approach

DAVID M. JABUSCH



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To my parents, **FRED AND THEO JABUSCH**,
who first encouraged me to enter the public forum

Preface

In cultures where freedom of expression has been protected, public speaking has been highly valued. It stands to reason, since public dialogue constitutes such an important component in the decision-making process in a democratic society.

For centuries, the study of public communication focused primarily on the speaker and “message preparation.” In recent years, communication scholars have begun to look at communication in general as more of a transaction, with greater focus on the listeners and the *simultaneous* transmission and reception of messages by both speakers and listeners.

In the public speaking context, however, one person does more of the speaking and the audience appears to be “just listening.” It looks like a transmission, or “I speak, you listen.”

It is my intent in this book to apply the transactional perspective to the public communication context; you will find no chapter on listening here. Every chapter is addressed to both speakers and listeners as they attempt to understand the process of, and develop competence in, sharing meanings in public communication transactions.

Achieving competence in public speaking is the major focus of this text. Competence is based not only on practice, but also on insight into the process of preparation and delivery as well as the ability to analyze experiences in public speaking. This ability to analyze will go far beyond any single class your students may be taking.

Any project of this nature depends on the support and cooperation of many individuals. I wish to thank Paul Berkhardt, Carl Kell, and Ron Manuto for reviewing the manuscript and offering many helpful suggestions for improvement. I am grateful to Jackie Byrd and Loa Nebeker for typing the manuscript, and to Bill Barke and Helyn Pultz for skillful editorial and production leadership. I am particularly indebted to my

mentors at Penn State University, who introduced me to a transactional approach to public communication long before the perspective became popular; as well as to my students and colleagues at the University of Utah who have helped me focus that perspective. Finally, I am grateful to my family for their support and understanding.

D.M.J.

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1

Introduction

In this chapter:

Why study public speaking?

How to study public speaking

Public speaking perspectives

Summary

Barbara Jordan, Democratic Convention Keynote Address (1976)

Summer of 1976 was unique in the history of American politics. The country had recently—and somewhat ignominiously—concluded the first nonvictorious war in our history. Three years earlier the first boycott of Arab oil supplies had dramatically demonstrated that the U.S. was not only no longer energy independent, but drastically overextended in our consumption of energy. In the aftermath of the Watergate scandal our first nonelected president, Gerald Ford, was standing for election. Opposing Ford was a relatively unknown Georgia governor, James Earl Carter, who had virtually clinched the Democratic nomination by winning a majority of Democratic primaries on a populist platform that was antigovernment in general and anti-Washington in particular. In the midst of the malaise and disillusionment that followed Viet Nam and Watergate, the country was attempting to celebrate its Bicentennial anniversary with activities ranging from vigorous and meaningful town meetings to the banality of painting fire hydrants red, white, and blue. People were clearly disillusioned, disappointed, and cynical about our government and not optimistic that life in the United States would be better in 2076, if our system existed at all by that time. In response to this atmosphere of political cynicism, and great partisan opportunity, the delegates to

the Democratic National Convention met in New York to draft a platform, nominate a president, and rally support for their candidates and causes. And the speaker they chose to keynote that rally was a dynamic Congresswoman from Texas, Barbara Jordan.

WHY STUDY PUBLIC SPEAKING?

The formal study of public speaking dates to the fifth century B.C. in ancient Greece and perhaps beyond. It has been important ever since, especially in those societies that value freedom of expression and making decisions democratically. In such societies the ability to clearly express one's own ideas and those of others has been highly valued. As you continue in the educational process, the study of public communication can contribute to your general education, your professional competence, and your leadership ability.

General Education¹

Although colleges and universities do not provide the cure-all for personal and social problems once expected of them, they can provide an important liberalizing and liberating experience for those who choose to participate. What can you expect to get from your college experience? In addition to the specific job skills you may acquire, your education should provide important career and life orientations.

There has been an unfortunate and false distinction between *liberal education* and *career education*. People tend to consider career education as that which prepares the individual for specific job tasks. Since job entry is so important for making a living, students and parents have come to value career education above all. Liberal education, on the other hand, has been identified with the arts, humanities, and sciences, which are thought to be less relevant to job placement. But real career education is much more than job training. Career education, aimed at preparing people for life and living, must include the goals of liberal education.

To make it in any profession, you must have certain human sensitivities. To participate with others responsibly on the job, in the family, and in the community, you should be an open and thinking person. What, then, are the goals of liberal, career education?

A liberally educated person communicates well. Communication is the first goal of liberal education because it is the foundation of all the others. A good communicator has an analytical attitude, attempting to discover how and why we are affected by messages. A good communicator is an articulate speaker and a clear writer, and a good communicator listens and reads with sensitivity. Finally, a good

communicator is aware of the importance of the media in our social environment, is sensitive to its effects, and receives media messages with an analytical and critical stance.

The liberally educated person thinks critically. Critical thinking involves the ability to see relationships between things, to understand how concepts are made of parts, and to evaluate the validity of statements based on certain assumptions and values. The critical thinker is able to ferret out the assumptions, observations, and values behind a claim, and to make assertions with full understanding of the observations and inferences behind the assertions. Competent communication and critical thinking are closely related: good communicators are critically involved in the production and reception of messages, and good critical thinking involves careful, sensitive understanding of messages from others.

The liberally educated person is able to solve problems. No profession can be approached with a recipe box; we cannot proceed through life as we might prepare a meal. As we all know, there are no easy formulas for living. The liberally educated person attempts to understand problems and to create appropriate solutions. Most problem solving involves more than one person, and communication is an important part of the process.

The liberally educated person adapts to change. We live in an era of rapid change. There is increasing need for people to understand and adapt to this flux. Adaptability requires relating to others in various ways and understanding new kinds of messages. In other words, we cannot adjust to the onslaught of change without being competent in communication.

The liberally educated person is open to new ideas. Open-mindedness is essential for problem solving and adaptation to change. One of the most important insights to come from a liberal education is that events, ideas, and things can be legitimately expressed in many different forms. The open-minded person knows there is no “absolutely right” way to conceptualize the world. The open-minded person is sensitive to the rich variation in human lifestyles, and attempts to understand a variety of perspectives. Open-minded communicators treasure their own values but respect and attempt to understand different perspectives reflected in the messages of others.

The liberally educated person is interculturally aware. We live in a multi-cultural society. The vast majority of people on this small earth represent cultures different from middle-class America. The liberally educated person understands this fact. In our communication with others, we must recognize that all messages are filtered through the communicator’s cultural screen. And in a shrinking, changing world, we encounter screens of many different colors and shapes.

The liberally educated person is environmentally sensitive. More than ever before, it is important for us to understand that we exist in a social and natural

environment. We are dependent on these environments. Each person's relationship to the niche involves a delicate balance of forces, which must be understood and respected. How we communicate with others is very much a function of the social, natural, and created environment.

The liberally educated person is personally integrated. Above all, the educated person knows and respects him- or herself. She or he is a healthy, happily functioning adult, behaving congruently and creatively. We have long known that how we feel about ourselves affects and is affected by how we relate to others. A competent communicator is a well-adjusted, mature human being.

These eight aims of liberal education are *goals* (ideals) toward which healthy people strive. Nobody is perfectly liberal in all these ways, but college education should provide a good beginning. And public communication education is an integral part of this process.

I hope that three important points are obvious from the discussion so far. First, society depends on communication. Second, the success of social participation in our society demands competent public communication. Third, a liberal education must deal with public communication.

Professional Competence

The study of public communication is important not only for your general education but also, in more specific ways, for the enhancement of your professional competence. Many professions such as law, teaching, and the ministry obviously involve extensive public speaking. In the business world, too, public presentations are continually made in order to acquire contracts, to interpret company policy to service clubs and other large groups, or to inform the public of a new development in the industry. In fact, few occupations today have no need for exposure to communicating in public—as exemplified by the public speaking workshops I have recently conducted for labor unions, traffic officers, pipeline corporation executives, hairdressers, and a state department of social services, to mention only a few.

Leadership

Finally, competency in public communication is an important component in leadership in any field. People who can stand up in a meeting and skillfully say what others may be thinking, or persuade the group to undertake a productive new course of action, will soon find themselves in leadership positions. Conversely, some people are elevated to leadership positions because of their expertise in other areas but find they spend substantial amounts of time in public speaking situations. Later in this book we will discuss the “super-representative.” This is a person who is a member of a group and shares its beliefs, values, and behaviors, but transcends the group in important

ways. One of the skills that contributes to the rise of the super-representative is competence in public speaking.

Finally, I feel that experience in public speaking has a positive effect on self-concept generally. Like most experienced public speaking teachers, I have observed many students develop a greater self-esteem and assertiveness resulting in their feeling better about themselves.

HOW TO STUDY PUBLIC SPEAKING

The focus of this book is clearly on the development of competency or skill in public speaking. However, I do not believe the age-old myth that practice makes perfect. Psychology has demonstrated conclusively that practice only makes permanent. As we shall see throughout this book, practicing what feels natural can often result in the development of counterproductive habits.

Furthermore, the study of public speaking can be terribly deceptive. The principles in this book look to be so easily understood as to be obvious. My experience has been, however, that while the recommended approaches may *seem* easy, inexperienced speakers frequently disregard them to opt for counterproductive approaches to the various stages of preparation, again because they want to be “natural.”

A sound approach to achieving competence in public speaking involves three interrelated processes: principles, practice, and critical analysis.

Principles

Principles are generalizations about effective public speaking which have been learned from research or from many years of experience. Principles are not invariant laws or rules. Rather, they are concepts that give insight into how the process of public communication works. By better knowing how the process works we can focus our practice on the most productive activities.

In this book we will discuss two basic kinds of principles. First, we will reduce the process to its many component parts so that you can see and understand each step or function in preparing to communicate in public. At the same time, we will provide general principles that allow you to look at the process in complete or global ways and from new perspectives or points of view.

Practice

A large part of your development as a public communicator comes from experience. In addition to the principles underlying the process of public communication, there are

techniques that must be practiced to be mastered. It is all well and good for a golfer to know he or she must keep the left arm straight, watch the ball, shift weight to the right leg, slow the backswing, shift the weight back to the left leg, follow through high, and a myriad of other principles of swinging a club. But without practice—lots of it—the golfer will never become skillful. Neither will a public speaker.

Critical Evaluation

Finally, your development as a competent public communicator is enhanced by critical evaluation of your practice, so that you can become aware of the areas in which you need to improve. During the early stages of development it is common to make some mistakes and have many successes. Learning from your mistakes and successes involves identifying exactly what happened, determining what caused it, and formulating recommendations for improvement; just as a doctor must first determine “where it hurts” (symptoms), diagnose the cause, and prescribe a cure.

You and your classmates (the listeners) can be very helpful in determining the symptoms. “I didn’t get the central idea,” or “The story of the accident made the third idea very compelling for me,” can provide the necessary raw data for critical evaluation.

Early on, your instructor will probably do most of the diagnosis and prescription, but as the term progresses and you master more and more of the principles, you should be able to diagnose and prescribe for yourself and your classmates.

By learning the principles that give insight into the process, mastering the correct techniques through practice, and critically evaluating your competence, you will have the best chance of developing into the most competent public speaker you can be.

WHAT IS PUBLIC SPEAKING?

Like most definitions, a definition of public speaking can be pretty arbitrary. However, in this book public speaking is defined as *a communication transaction in a public context*. Let’s look at three major aspects of this definition.

Communication

First and foremost, public speaking is a form of communication. Some inexperienced public speakers think more about themselves (i.e., how they look and sound and think) than about the listener, and then public speaking comes across as display, self-expression, or self-centered performance.

Scheidel has defined communication as

... that process which occurs when speaking/listening agents interact by transmitting and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages in communication contexts.²

Note that this definition has several implications. First, communication focuses on a response or end result. This response usually takes the form of meanings, feelings, or behaviors, which are *shared* by participants in the communication event. This awareness makes the public speaker more oriented to the audience and their response than to him- or herself. Being guided by the needs of listeners will be a major focus of this book.

Second, Scheidel's concept of communication includes both verbal and nonverbal messages. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 discuss the thought processes you can use to determine these messages. Chapter 5 deals directly with the use of words, or the verbal dimension of your message, while Chapter 6 discusses delivery, or the nonverbal dimension of the message.

Third, Scheidel's definition of communication states that there is an interaction among the participants. In a moment we will pursue this idea and argue that the relationship between the speakers and listeners is a *transaction*. Suffice it to say here that listeners are active, not passive. While speakers are transmitting messages, both verbally and nonverbally, listeners too are providing *feedback*, nonverbally and sometimes even verbally. The skillful speaker, then, is also simultaneously a receiver or listener. The speaker constantly monitors feedback and adjusts to it. Hence there is an ongoing *interaction* between the speaker-listener and listener-speakers.

What Is Public?

The distinction between a "group" and a "public meeting" is not altogether clear. Imagine yourself in your "speech" classroom. You have arrived early and are explaining to a friend an abstract concept such as "symbolic interaction." Two or three more classmates arrive. You continue your explanation as the class grows to ten or twelve. Before you have finished, the entire public speaking class of twenty-five people is listening. When did that conversation become a "group" and when did the group become a "public"? I think it is helpful to look at public speaking as an elevated conversation—just as personal, just as animated, and natural.

There are some differences, however. The most obvious is the number of other participants or listeners. Two people make a dyad. Three or more make a group. With somewhere between a dozen and twenty or more, a group becomes a "public."

In order to adapt to speaking to a "public" you need to make adjustments. It is usually necessary to stand up to be seen and to speak up to be heard. It is necessary to adapt to a wider range of understandings, beliefs, values, and behaviors. These adjustments are, of course, the subject matter of the remainder of this book.