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# PUBLIC SPEAKING AND THE POWER OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE

When books like *I'd Rather Die Than Give a Speech* are common fare in the marketplace, it's not difficult to understand the daunting challenges speech instructors face. Not only do instructors have to give students the tools to walk through their fear of speaking, but must teach students how to tap into and express their individual voices in a reasoned, rational, and passionate manner. We are increasingly challenged to inspire students to understand the benefits of public speaking as an important life skill.

How can we help students move beyond their fear and become enthusiastic about public speaking? Part of the answer may be the use of personal narrative. The power of the personal narrative is not news to speech instructors. Everyone has heard student speakers who give speeches driven *only* by personal narrative. These are students who refuse to research their topic. Student audiences love these speakers until they learn more about the specifics of giving good speeches. Then, the student who relies only on personal narrative becomes the center of the best constructive criticism. During feedback sessions, he or she is hard-pressed to answer the questions, "Who is your source?" and "Where did you get your information?"

Yet, it is not news to speech instructors that personal narrative accomplishes at least three important tasks when incorporated into speeches: establishes common ground with the audience; helps create a sense of goodwill, which is an important aspect of credibility; and helps keep the attention of the audience.

From discussions with other instructors and student feedback, some of us came to believe that personal narrative, especially biography, could be an agenda for outside speakers in the classroom. Thus, the pilot program of the Community College of Denver Speaker Series was born. The three series speakers in fall 1997 were given a simple task: Show the audience how public speaking helped launch your career.

The first speaker was Jeanne Faatz, the Assistant Majority Leader to the Colorado Legislature and college professor who teaches communications at Metropolitan State College. She was able to incorporate many of the concepts she taught in her beginning speech classes into her speech. She spoke of her beginnings as "a shy, wide-eyed, young girl," and used the acronym "SMART" to delineate the five main points of her speech—"S" for transferable skills, working her way to "T" for critical thinking. Jeanne also incorporated oral cites in her speech and received high scores on her presentation.

The second speaker was Dani Newsome, television and radio host, and former civil rights attorney. She talked about her early days in court and how public speaking skills helped her through tough times in front of judges. Because she was a civil rights attorney, she never had to speak to a jury, but rather to judges. She stood behind a podium equipped with a traffic light. When the light turned green, she could present her case. When the light turned red, she had to stop talking. The judges often sat above the attorney, so Dani addressed the intimidation this situation could create for a speaker. She spoke about speech anxiety; and although her speech was not as structured as the first, the students gave her high scores on the same standard evaluation. Students were most impressed with her ability to sound confident and comfortable—even though she admitted at the end of her speech that she had been nervous. When asked how she managed to appear so confident, she said, "Be prepared and fake it, 'til you make it."

The largest turnout was for Heather McNeil, storyteller, author of two books on storytelling, and librarian. She opened her speech with a story that got the audience focused on taking risks. This was a great segue to addressing speech anxiety, because she then talked about her worst experiences on stage. She addressed aspects of delivery such as body language, dealing with hostile members of the audience, eye contact, and visual aids; and she closed her speech with another story.

Her speech was impromptu, but she pursued the stated goal. She had had training in theater and voice, and this speech was more entertaining than the others.

One particular comment about "looking at foreheads" instead of making eye contact was challenged by the instructors, but discussing this aspect of delivery created more interaction. The students and faculty gave her generally high marks on the standard evaluation.

The series would be considered a success if 60% of the students who were enrolled in beginning speech classes at CCD attended the speeches. Of the 415 students enrolled, only 73 attended (22.9%). There seemed to be two reasons for this low number: the speaker who had the largest audience spoke in the evening, and speakers during the day were in competition with others on campus; a calendar of *all* the speakers on campus for the semester had been distributed to all instructors and included serious competition.

The series was a success in pushing students outside the classroom to evaluate speakers, and student retention improved! Personal narrative as a rhetorical device is perceived in a whole new way because of the series. All in all, it was a great learning experience.

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## CHANGING CHANNELS

Ray was coming my way, and a feeling of dread spread through me. For two days, he had been coming to the tutoring lab in search of the key that would crack the code to understanding set theory. After a few questions, I realized he didn't understand basic concepts, and I was failing at explaining them. I changed channels and personalized the problem.

"Ray, you have a job, don't you?" He did a double-take but answered anyway.

"Sure."

"Well, what do you do?"

"I do some filing and run errands." He started talking about sales, production, and the company's structure when I broke in:

"Let's go back to this problem we were doing, and we'll pretend it represents your company. Let's see now, here's set A. Those are the people who do sales. There'll be 20 of them. Set B will represent the people on the line who make the stuff. There're 35 of them. This area where the circles overlap will represent those people who do both sales and production. There must be a few people like that?"

"Yeah." he responded.

"Let's say there're 5 workers in this group. Now the group on the outside will be all the people who work there but aren't salespeople or line workers. That's the support staff like you and the bosses."

"There's the maintenance people too," he added.

"Yeah, let's say there're 40 people in that group. Now how many people are in A?"

He answered correctly and continued answering correctly as we went through the next few questions in the text. I noticed a smile spreading over his face as the answers started coming faster and faster.

"What about this one?" I said, pointing to B'.

"Oh that's easy," he answered, as he tallied up the sales people and support staff.

" A « B?" I asked.

"No problem. You mean once I understand this then I can do probabilities, too?"

"Well, let's see. What's P(A)?"

"That's simple," and he calculated P(A). Calculating P(A«B) and P(A«B') quickly followed. Now the only problem I had was keeping up with Ray as he raced through problem after problem. His excitement and joy were contagious, and soon we were cheering every answer, checking to see if the book was "right."

Learning had happened, and I was part of it. It was a fun learning experience that reminded me of a line from a recent play: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Many of us develop our teaching methods and then expect them to work for every student. Sometimes we need to change channels and try something different.

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