

Responsive Audiences, Responsive Speakers

Josh Compton

Institute for Writing and Rhetoric

Dartmouth College

Responsive Audiences, Responsive Speakers

Expecting more from audiences in our speech classrooms will not only lead to better speeches, but also more closely mirror the type of collaborative communication that underscores a healthy democratic society. With an active audience, public speaking moves from monologue to dialogue, and as Pericles once observed, discussion is “an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all.” As speech instruction highlights the collaborative dimension of good public speaking, we help students discover how public speaking—whether from the speaker’s or audience’s perspective—can be a participatory, active, dynamic process.

But if we sleight audience responsibilities in our speech classrooms, we unleash a mass on our student speakers—a mass of apathy that makes speech improvement more difficult, dampens student excitement toward future public speaking opportunities, and discourages participation in continuing dialogue. When we approach speech in a way that reveals collaboration—with not only recognition of but also celebration of audiences—we invite participation in ideas. This essay echoes an argument that traces to the earliest writings on rhetoric through modern approaches to speech instruction: One of the best ways to help students develop their voices in preparation for participation in a democratic society is to address their responsibilities as active audience members.

The notion that audience matters in speech is certainly not new. “For of the three elements in speechmaking—speaker, subject, and person addressed,” Aristotle offered in Book I of *The Rhetoric*, “it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech’s end and object.” This early view—that listeners not only

attend to messages but also determine them—continues to resonate with contemporary rhetoricians. Rhetorical scholars have offered nuanced perspectives on the concept of audience, and we're reminded to view audience perceptions as more than a final product of a speech, but instead, a factor in each stage of speech development.

We should also consider what constitutes the best type of audience to facilitate understanding and collaboration. In his work, *Rhetoric and Civility*, Harold Barrett (2004) advocates the *good audience*: “[t]he model of an active, self-respecting, rhetorically disposed person or group who in their rhetorical maturity selectively confirm and disconfirm the behavior of people with whom they relate” (p. x.) We should extend the idea of a good audience beyond audience members’ internal responses to a message—how they grapple with arguments, process evidence, “selectively confirm and disconfirm”—to audience members’ external responses to a message. That is, the internal process is important in terms of audience members’ solid reasoning and good listening, but the external process has bearing in the act of speechmaking, too. Nathan Sheppard’s (1892) late 19th century work tells us that listeners’ reactions—and speakers’ anticipation of listeners’ reactions—serve as “excellent training...to be reminded, by the tap of the impatient heel, that audiences have rights which orators are bound to respect” (p. 118). Effective audience members fairly attend to messages and actively participate in acts of speechmaking.

We have empirical validation for the idea that how—and whether—an audience responds with external feedback matters. Peter MacIntyre, Kimly

Thivierge, and J. Renée MacDonald's (1997) research reveals that speaker perceptions of audience responsiveness have significant bearings on a speaker's effectiveness. For one thing, a responsive audience makes speakers less anxious. As Peter MacIntyre and his colleagues discovered, speakers are more anxious when speaking before an unresponsive audience. Audience responsiveness affects the quality of the speeches, too, and responsiveness has an even greater impact than awareness of being evaluated. It's a remarkable thought: Students are more troubled by the prospect of a visibly disinterested audience of classmates than they are troubled by whether they are being graded by their professor. Research like Peter MacIntyre's and our experiences suggest that an active audience of peers leads to better speechmaking—better ideas, better understanding, and better learning experiences for our students.

Implications for Course Instruction

Our speech courses provide forums to talk about the importance of audience in speechmaking. Speech classrooms also offer opportunities for practice of good audience acts. By considering the influence of listeners, we remind our students that to use our best voices in a democratic society, we should also use our best ears and best minds.

Public speaking instructors should continue to be mindful of how we talk about audience in our course instruction. If speech is *dynamic*, *collaborative*, and *dialogic*, we should help our students understand implications for both speakers and audience members. We should communicate that an audience is doing more than hearing speeches, but also interpreting, responding, and reacting. How we

anticipate those reactions, and how we adapt in the moment of speechmaking, influences the quality of our discourse. Talking about speech as transactional yet assigning linear speeches leads to speaking that is active in theory but passive in practice.

Our instruction should help students with internal responses to speeches. Focusing on strategies for identifying reasoning fallacies, for example, helps foster careful listening. We should also continue to highlight how theory informs understanding of audience responses to speechmaking. When we dismiss public speaking courses as mere skills training, one of the first things to go is theory. Yet theory helps our students understand why their rhetorical choices succeed or fail—whether from a speaker’s or an audience’s perspective.

We should also speak to external responses to speeches in our classrooms and discuss with our students the benefits of showing explicit responses during speeches. MacIntyre and his colleagues (1997) suggest that we point out “the facilitating effects of responsive nonverbal cues, such as simple smiles and nods” (p. 167). Don Waisanen and Rodney Reynolds (2008) describe a classroom instruction technique called *side-coaching*, based on a common practice in improvisation theater groups. Speech professors and classmates are encouraged to call out suggestions to speakers in the moment of speechmaking. The researchers also suggest calling out advice to an audience during practice sessions.

Collaboration through peer group work can also model audience involvement. Peer discussion can begin at the earliest stages of speech development, as students are auditioning their ideas for topics and more refined theses. If the

process of speech is collaborative, the act of speechmaking is more likely to be collaborative. Approaching public speaking as a collaborative encounter has the added benefit of underscoring public speaking as a process. When students engage in public speaking with a goal of learning from the audience—of interpreting feedback as an evaluation of ideas—speech becomes a way of knowing and not merely a way of showing.

Some of our learning objectives should speak to audience goals. This sends a clear message to our students that audience responsibilities are part of a public speaking course, on equal footing with responsibilities of speakers.

We should encourage students to have an attitude of responsiveness during the speechmaking process—an interest in what an audience is thinking and feeling. Projecting this interest has a number of benefits, including keeping audience considerations at the tops of the minds of speakers. An attitude of responsiveness also influences speaking tone, moving the speaker from performance (speaking *at* an audience) to communication (speaking *with* an audience).

When we reject a linear model of communication for a transactional one, we empower an otherwise static audience. But without a responsive audience, speeches are more transactional in theory than in practice. A view of public speaking as collaborative that includes considerations of audience responsibilities moves us closer to capturing the better moments of public communication.

References

Aristotle. *The Rhetoric*.

Barrett, H. (2004). *Rhetoric and civility*. Albany: SUNY.

MacIntyre, P. D., Thivierge, K. A., & MacDonald, J. R. (1997). The effects of audience interest, responsiveness, and evaluation on public speaking anxiety and related variables. *Communication Research Reports*, 14(2), 157-168.

Waisanen, D. J., & Reynolds, R. A. (2008). *Side-coaching* the public speech: Toward improvisational delivery adjustments *in the moment*. *Communication Teacher*, 22(1-4), 18-21.