

For Radical Tradition(s): Reclaiming Public Speaking from the Cultural Void

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Our public speaking textbooks make overt, frequent linkages to helping students cultivate airs of professionalism, personal improvement, and communicative competence. “Effective oral communication skills can improve you life in three crucial areas,” intones one text: “Personal relationships, college classes, and professional careers” (Sellnow 5). When democracy and civic engagement are invoked, gestures to the power of words are proffered (complete with polished photos of Barack Obama or Nelson Mandela or Bono). I have nothing against these characterizations. Yet why is what we have to say about public speaking so banal? Perhaps the reason is this: The public speaking course has become corrupted by cultural mores that have nearly succeeded in pushing its intellectual traditions altogether out of the frame. That this corruption is symptomatic of what is taking place across the academy is cold comfort (Kirp).

The speech course is at a pivotal juncture. Either it will continue to drift along through the competitive pressures David Kirp has described, or we push back. What if we insisted that the course expose students to rhetorical and democratic traditions through which they have ample opportunities to discover and refine their public voices? What if we structured the course so that students could hone those voices against exemplars and test those voices against the backdrop of a public culture in urgent need for discourse characterized by originality, reflection, and courage? What if, finally, we built opportunities for students to temper those voices in sacrificial keys?

Perhaps radical surgery is necessary. If the public speaking course is to resist further corruption, perhaps we must cut out the diseased portions of our pedagogy and institutional commitments so that the body may begin to heal. As with any surgery, there will be trauma: We may experience a decline in our enrollments and the tarnishing of our reputation. This short-term pain may be necessary to ensure the body can repair itself. What would that healing look like? Two tentative answers come to mind.

First, we must explicitly reframe the course as concerned with our shared rhetorical and democratic inheritances so that we may begin to reclaim our best liberal ideals. Anne Colby and her co-authors do not invoke the speech course in their description of the benefits of liberal education, but consider:

Helping students develop the capacity for critical thinking and the habit of using it, teaching them to be open-minded and interested in pursuing ideas, requiring them to back up their claims and to expect others to do the same, and encouraging them to be knowledgeable and accustomed to thinking about moral, civic, and political issues will put them in a strong posture to think independently about their positions and commitments.

(Colby et al., 17)

Were the public speaking course empowered by such commitments, students might come to view it not as a mere workshop where they learn about a message's transmission to a particular audience in service to particular occasion, but as an art concerned foremost with shared deliberation in the crucible of public accountability for the common good (Hollenbach; MacIntyre; Sandel).

Second, we must recast the stakes of the course. As one of my colleagues has written, “Students are never more alive to their own conduct than under the eyes of their peers, and rhetorical performance is the very medium in which this sensitivity is developed. Here is where they can begin to understand the legitimate differences in cultures and values that block the drive for consensus and suggest the need for reasonableness that can co-exist with pluralism”(Arthos, n.p.). Although many colleges and universities require the class as part of students’ general education, this institutionalization has functioned paradoxically to consign the course to a menu students refer to only when it is time to eat from the registration buffet. Enough. Rhetoric is not for triflers.

Because the course has become too popular and too enamored with its supposed utility to students’ everyday lives, much of what passes for eloquence within it is akin to the eloquence seen on YouTube. Popular culture and technology have combined to make space for any voice with access to the internet and basic knowledge about how to upload videos to the World Wide Web. Yet this explosion of popular voices is not democracy nor eloquence nor wisdom; it is solipsism and our public discourse is poorer for it. Despite our best efforts, students fail to grasp what Edwin Black described as the discriminating reticence that, paradoxically, makes eloquence possible.

If the public speaking course ever is to carry through a more intense relationship with democracy (the inextricability of these cannot be overstated), then we must reframe the course. Our beacons of imitation might be, among others, the eloquence of Lincoln and King. These examples, as Black reminds us, while the product of “people of exceptional moral imagination or of exceptional intellectual penetration,” nevertheless

are examples that demonstrate “more keenly than the rest of us how straitened their mastery is. . . . Their speeches struggle to give form to the chaotic, fluency to the mute. The eloquence of a Lincoln or King,” Black continues, “may seem to us the very articulation of power, but perhaps we hear it more truly if we hear it as the cry of their limits, the defiance of their human insufficiency” (10).

In recasting the public speaking course, the central value that should guide our pedagogy is sacrifice. About the necessity of sacrifice within our shared polity, Danielle Allen has thoughtfully essayed that “Democratic citizenship must involve practices not only for assessing whether a given experience is reasonably identified as a loss and whether that sacrifice is reasonably requested but also for *responding* even to those emotions that remain after the criteria of reasonableness have done their work” (47; emphasis added). Our task should be to teach the course in ways that invite students to stretch their rhetorical, public imaginations so they are genuinely moved to see and act beyond themselves. This pedagogical impulse might be most aptly characterized as Isocratean, in that the aim would be to teach students to “carve out a common purpose, a shared view of the cardinal importance of the polis and its welfare, and [to invite them to undertake] a concerted effort to make the vitality and destiny of the polis every citizen’s affair” (Poulakos 3).*

This shift from personal empowerment and professional refinement to sacrifice and attending concerns with creating a common good will bring the class back to its democratic roots, even as the shift will turn those roots over by challenging students “to learn things about the inner workings of democracy that we do not normally see” (Allen 24). Angelina Grimke’s injunction to William Lloyd Garrison on the risks and

commitments of community is especially instructive: “If we call upon the slave-holder to suffer the loss of what he calls property, then let us show him we make this demand from a deep sense of duty, by being ourselves willing to suffer . . . in what we believe to be the cause of bleeding humanity” (qtd. in Browne 48). A commitment to sacrifice makes space within the course for reflection, free thinking, and thoughtful engagement with the intellectual and rhetorical traditions on which the course was built.

In inviting us to turn the course toward a deeper engagement with the ethics of sacrifice, listening, and the humility that should mark our public encounters, I want to echo an observation offered by Kimberly K. Smith: That the norms and conventions of our democratic politics—the norms and conventions of our rhetorical culture—are nonobvious (even today) and should be contested (4; see also Farrell). The public speaking classroom is the proper site to let that contest play out. Informed by our best learning and richest insights about our rhetorical, liberal traditions we may engage students in becoming liberally educated in the ways imagined by Wabash College’s own Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts: “the overarching goal of a liberal arts education is to provide students with the necessary skills to construct lives of substance and achievement, helping them to become wise citizens” (Center of Inquiry).

We find ourselves, then, at a juncture. The consequences of what we choose will reverberate significantly and may affect the instruction of public speaking over a generation. May we choose wisely: The need for public wisdom perhaps has never been more urgent.

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