Public speaking courses have the potential to connect the lives of students to the communities around them. Through public speaking, a student can engage the political conversations that create the society in which s/he lives. Public speaking can empower a student by providing the tools necessary to fulfill his or her rights and responsibilities as a citizen in a diverse democratic society. Such proclamations of the power of public speaking have been a part of its identity from its earliest conceptualizations. However, this connection between public speaking and democratic citizenship has been questioned as part of increasing inquiry into the connection between all of higher education and the society in which it operates. This is a serious issue for a field of study such as public speaking that has been defined by its ability to create citizens and to facilitate participation in democratic society. If public speaking pedagogy fails to prepare students to engage in meaningful democratic discourse, one might question what function public speaking courses do serve.

Any exploration into the relationship between public speaking and educating for democratic citizenship must begin with an articulation of what it means to educate for democratic citizenship. The model for democracy on which I plan to base my argument is Chantal Mouffe’s idea of agonistic pluralism. In this view, to practice democratic citizenship in American society is to understand its pluralistic nature and to see competing perspectives and ideologies as valid voices that help create and maintain that society, rather than as enemies who threaten it. Indeed, it is the constant adversarial clashes that keep democracy alive. To take an agonistic perspective on democratic
pluralism is to realize that the political will always be characterized by antagonism, a we/them dichotomy that cannot and must not be ignored. The key to this type of pluralistic politics is to embrace this dichotomy, to maintain the disparate voices, while not falling into the trap of conceiving of those holding opposing viewpoints as enemies.

Avoiding this trap is difficult. As Mouffe points out, "in the domain of collective identifications, where what is in question is the creation of a 'we' by the delimitation of a 'them', the possibility always exists that this we/them relation will turn into a relation of the friend/enemy type" (2-3). When the other is defined as "enemy," the choices for engaging the other are severely limited. Such a view implies that nothing can be gained from action not designed to destroy the enemy, and the power relationships that are always present will determine the outcome of the conflict. There is no chance for discussion and deliberation. Because in human interaction power relationships cannot be denied, and because antagonism/the political cannot be denied, the type of pluralistic democracy advocated here seeks to engage issues of power and take shape from political diversity. As Robert Ivie argues, "pluralistic politics, then, is foremost a matter of figuring out how a necessarily conflicted polity can bridge its divisions sufficiently for people to live together without sacrificing a healthy degree of diversity" (2002 277).

This view of democracy lies in contrast to commonly endorsed concepts associated with democracy such as rationality, the common good, and seeking consensus as each is damaging to democratic process in a diverse society. We cannot pretend that conflict can ever be eliminated from a diverse society and because of that, democracy can only function when that conflict is recognized and engaged. A conflict model of
democracy predicts that if this conflict were to be eliminated, democracy would cease to exist.

It is important to point out the problematic tendency for deliberative theorists to associate pluralism, conflict, and difference with identity. Bonnie Honig argues that if we are to take difference in democratic society seriously, we must understand the concept of difference as beyond simply conflicting identities. Rather than treating difference as represented by identities different from our own, we must recognize the conflicts within ourselves that place us within multiple identities which Honig call “dilemmatic spaces” (259). She writes: “Indeed, we might think of the subject as positioned on multiple, conflicted axes of identity/difference such that her agency itself is constituted, even enabled—and not simply paralyzed—by daily dilemmatic choices and negotiations” (259).

Recognizing one’s own internal difference is important when trying to transcend difference on a larger, cultural level. By not conceptualizing one’s own identity and the identity of the Other as a complete unified structure, or what Honig calls “home,” characterized as a “place free of power, conflict, and struggle, a place—an identity, a form of life, a group vision—unmarked or unriven by difference,” the better equipped one will be to recognize sites of commonality between her/himself and a political adversary (258). In conceptualizing political conflict in a diverse democratic society, then, it is vital to not only to avoid understanding it as a war between friends and enemies, but also to avoid viewing participants in the conflict as representing clear, fully formed identities devoid of internal struggle, conflict, and difference.
A conflict model of democracy including a recognition of the conflicted nature of citizens lends itself naturally to explorations in rhetoric and public speaking. One of the participants at the renowned Wingspread Conference in 1970, Hugh Dalziel Duncan, argues:

I have said that a model of rhetoric as used in democratic society must be a conflict model. Conflict of all kinds, ranging from government by opposition under parliamentary rules, to war, must be accepted as normal to rhetoric. We must accept the fact that as we perfect rhetoric we increase our chances of hate and doubt, as well as love and certainty.

Democratic communication involves risk to superiors, inferiors, and equals alike. (150)

It is this attention to conflict both in democracy and in rhetoric that must play a significant role in public speaking pedagogy. Public speaking students should be taught to embrace conflict as an important characteristic of democracy operating in a condition of pluralism. By teaching students, implicitly or explicitly, to avoid conflict and contestation, public speaking courses not only widen the gap between public speaking pedagogy and democracy, but also teach a conceptualization of democracy that threatens its existence. In order to fulfill its potential to educate students for democratic citizenship, I argue that public speaking should be taught as what Swartz calls a “critical pedagogy.” Swartz defines a critical pedagogy as “a strategic cultural intervention by scholars, one empowering students to disseminate the results of a critical education throughout the wider non-academic community” (137). Teaching the process of speech preparation as a critical exercise offers opportunity for students to more clearly
understand how their speaking efforts relate to a democratic society. Swartz further defines the practice of a critical pedagogy in departments of Communication as: “The process of helping students to identify and critique the ways language reifies and structures human social reality for the purpose of empowering students to engage more actively in both the construction and the critique of society” (137). Guided by such an approach students would be required to do more critical analysis of rhetorical situations, focusing on the political relationships between participants in the conversation they have chosen to enter. Further, students would be urged to use this deeper understanding of language to seek out and engage (rather than ignore) widely disparate perspectives.

Faced with an audience of multiple perspectives, then, a student speaker seeking to engage rather than destroy those perspectives may turn to the imprecise and flexible nature of language to identify where the boundaries between him/herself and the Other are not as distinctly drawn or can be revised and/or articulated less sharply. Ivie explains how one might use such a conceptualization of language tools to address the Other:

This is a rhetoric of metaphor and irony which keeps the boundaries appropriately fuzzy within a prevailing framework of interpretation and political motivation. Fuzzy boundaries are conducive to locating points of identification between adversaries who position themselves on either side of a dividing line. They make it possible for rivals to become concurrently adverse and consubstantial which is to say suitably conflicted and democratically inflected. (2003 192)

These “fuzzy boundaries” and Honig’s “dilemmatic spaces” may serve as points of potentially overlapping interest and as sites in which to ground productive democratic
deliberation. Such a strategy is not to be confused with ineffectual attempts to establish common ground rooted in the common good, nor the evasive type of strategic ambiguity that seeks to condense perspectives and avoid conflict. Rather, it is a persuasive use of language that plays with competing perspectives to create new combinations of perspectives, and thus recognizes shared symbolic space where productive conflict can take place. Exploring language in this way would provide student speakers a more realistic experience of speaking meaningfully in a diverse democratic society.

The political nature and flexibility of language is only one tool with which to equip public speaking students to engage the necessarily conflicted citizens of a modern democracy. Recognition of diversity and an acceptance of conflict has implications for nearly every aspect of public speaking pedagogy. Concepts such as audience analysis, argumentation, and the very goals and purposes of public speaking deserve new life and attention if we hope to fulfill the promises that have been traditionally associated with public speaking.
Works Cited


