Public Speaking in the “New Era of Responsibility”

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The basic questions raised by this edition of the Brigance Colloquy are not new, of course. We all know of the origins of the rhetorical tradition in the ancient Greek city-state, and public speaking—at least until quite recently—has almost always been taught as a liberal art and as an important component of a general education. At Penn State, for example, the basic public speaking course—along with extracurricular public speaking contests and debates—dates back to the mid-19th century, and public speaking is still a general education requirement for all of our 42,000 undergraduates. To my mind, then, the relationship between public speaking and democracy is both obvious and historically well-grounded: public speaking traditionally has been viewed as an essential skill of democratic citizenship and as an important element of a well-rounded, liberal education. But what does it mean to approach public speaking as a liberal art? How would a more intense focus on the relationship between public speaking and democracy impact the public speaking course? These are the questions posed to us by the organizers of this colloquy, and they are important questions, not only for our academic discipline but for our political culture.

We can begin by coming at our questions from a different direction: what are the alternatives to teaching public speaking as a liberal art? What other approaches are there to teaching public speaking, and how do the skills or values taught by those approaches differ from those emphasized in the classical tradition? Unfortunately, the answer to these questions has become all too clear in recent years, as more and more colleges and universities have moved toward a business or corporate model of public speaking—a model that I dubbed the “Dale Carnegie” approach at the 2005 Brigance Colloquy.1 Typically employed in courses with titles
like “Presentational Speaking” or even “Corporate Communication,” the Dale Carnegie approach emphasizes appearances and performance over the civic substance of speech. It offers “tips” for creating good PowerPoint slides, but it says little about the role of public speaking in a democratic society. Treating public speaking as a tool of personal advancement, the Dale Carnegie approach is all about showmanship and “winning,” not disinterested leadership, civic engagement, or the public good. Worse yet, it often celebrates the most manipulative, even demagogic communicators among us: the flamboyant politicians, the icons of big business and consumer culture, and the celebrity-heroes of the sports entertainment and pop culture industries.

Upholding the molding of consumer preferences and the manipulation of public opinion as the measures of “success,” the Dale Carnegie approach treats public speaking as a skill that one needs to “beat the competition.”

Another alternative approach to public speaking is what I labeled the “ideological” approach—an approach that rejects the principles and ideals of the classical tradition as somehow incompatible with feminist, multi-cultural, or even post-modern theory. At first glance, ideological textbooks may not seem all that different; most still treat the mechanics of public speaking much like traditional texts. Yet they reflect a very different educational philosophy, and the personal and political values they celebrate are antithetical to the classical tradition. Emphasizing personal identity rather than our common heritage, diversity and separatism rather than some larger “public good,” they reject what historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., once described as “the historic theory of America as one people— the theory that has thus far managed to keep American society whole.” Instead of encouraging unity and common purpose, they promote what Schlesinger has called “the fragmentation, resegregation, and tribalization of American life.”
Now, don’t get me wrong. Our public speaking courses must change with the times, and we must take into account both the realities of our contemporary consumer culture and the growing diversity of our society. Even Schlesinger concedes that multi-cultural education has helped Americans to develop a “more complex and invigorating sense of the world—and of themselves,” and that broader cultural awareness will only become more important in the years to come. Yet that is not to say that public speaking courses ought to indoctrinate students to identity politics, nor should we reduce public speaking to a “skills” or “service” course housed in the business school. We must acknowledge the greater challenges of public deliberation in a diverse, multi-cultural society, and we need to take account of globalization, new information technologies, and the realities of the Consumer Age. Yet in what President Obama has proclaimed a “new era of responsibility,” we also have a pressing need to revive our deliberative democracy. And in order to do that, we need to rediscover the common bonds of our heritage, relearn the habits and skills of public deliberation, and forge a new vision of our national purposes and ambitions. In other words, we need to rediscover the ethical and civic spirit of the classical tradition while taking into account the technological and cultural realities of the twenty-first century.

William Norwood Brigance had it right more than half a century ago. Democracy and the study of speech were “born together,” and there has never been a successful democracy without a “very large part” of its citizenry trained to be “effective, intelligent, and responsible speakers.” Talking less about the rights than the responsibilities of free speech, Brigance emphasized the need not only to teach public speaking, but also to cultivate a citizenry with the “popular intelligence” to effectively “listen and judge.” Elaborating on the role of speech in a democracy, Brigance wrote:
We are beset by choices and temptations. We are haunted by shadows of fear. We listen to speakers, then, because we hope they will throw light on our problems, temptations, and fears. We listen because we hope they will give us new information, new ideas, or will simply water and cultivate old ideas. We listen because we want to be given encouragement, to renew our faith, to strengthen our determination.

As citizens in a democracy, we have a right to speech “worth listening to,” Brigance concluded, and anybody who failed to deliver deserved to be “put out of business.”

What did Brigance mean by speech “worth listening to”? And how might we promote such speech in today’s mass-mediated environment? At the most basic level, we might begin by insisting that students address topics of genuine public importance, and that they meet their obligation to research those topics thoroughly. In this “new era of responsibility,” perhaps we can start insisting once again that students know what they’re talking about. Beyond that, we should revive the neo-classical emphasis on the ethics of public speaking, and we might even demand that student speeches to be grounded in at least a rudimentary understanding of America’s history, political institutions, and rhetorical traditions. If public speaking is to return to the center of the liberal arts, we must be part of the larger movement to reestablish civic and historical literacy as core concerns of the undergraduate curriculum. And we can contribute to that movement not only by re-envisioning the basic course, but also by incorporating Brigance’s ideals into all our courses and extra-curricular activities, including debate and forensics.

At Penn State, we have embarked upon a number of initiatives designed to restore rhetorical studies to the center of the liberal arts, including our new Center for Democratic Deliberation and various grant-funded programs, like Voices of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory
Project. We also have pushed for new general education courses in rhetoric, including a popular new undergraduate course in critical thinking and media literacy, *Persuasion and Propaganda*. Beyond that, we have expanded our undergraduate offerings in rhetorical criticism and American public address, and we are collaborating with the English department to develop new courses exploring the relationships among writing, speaking, visual communication, and digital media. Finally, we have taken a hard look at intercollegiate debate and concluded that it no longer serves, as it once did, as a "laboratory for the democratic process and an important training ground for future policy makers."\(^{10}\) As many of you know, debaters now either "spew" arguments so rapidly as to be incomprehensible, or they engage in dramatic "performances" that supposedly reflect a "post-modern" critique of the norms of debate itself.\(^{11}\) A quarter-finals match at the 2008 national tournament of the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) even degenerated in an obscenity-laden shouting match, during which one of the faculty coaches actually dropped his pants and "mooned" a judge.\(^{12}\)

Public speaking and related courses and activities should do more than prepare students to "beat the competition." Nor should they be become platforms for supposedly avant-garde intellectual or ideological trends. As Brigance argued, public speaking should be education for citizenship, encouraging an ethic of active participation and a commitment to deliberating "in good faith" and serving the "public good." We need to teach students how to recognize and resist propaganda and demagoguery in the "marketplace of ideas," and we need to encourage them to get involved in civic affairs, respect the diversity of opinion in our society, and serve some cause larger than themselves. As President Obama emphasized throughout his campaign, we need to change the tone of public discourse in America, foster more respectful and constructive public dialogue, and work together to solve the enormous problems we face. In this
“new era of responsibility,” public speaking—and rhetorical studies in general—has an important role to play in educating young people for engaged citizenship.

Notes


3 Textbooks with feminist or multicultural themes already have captured a small but significant portion of the huge public speaking market, and the first post-modern public speaking textbook, entitled Public Speaking in Postmodernity, is reportedly in the works. See Josh Gunn, “Public Speaking in Postmodernity,” The Rosewater Chronicles, October 8, 2008, online at: http://www.joshiejuice.com/blog/?p=650.

4 In Invitation to Public Speaking, for example, Cindy L. Griffin incorporates the feminist theory of “invitational rhetoric” into the basic public speaking text, yet she still structures the book around the Aristotelian “canons” of rhetoric. The table of contents of the book differs little from traditional texts, with chapters on developing one’s topic, audience analysis, research, supporting materials, reasoning, organization, style, and delivery. See Cindy L. Griffin, Invitation to Public Speaking (New York: Wadsworth, 2004).


6 Ibid., 156.

7 At some universities, that is exactly what is happening already. At Indiana University, for example, the transformation of the department of speech communication into a media and cultural studies department coincided with the development of a separate department of “business communication” in the Kelley School of Business—a department staffed largely by permanent adjuncts, some with degrees in communication, but others with degrees in English or business. Similarly, the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business created its own program in business communication, headed by a communication Ph.D. from Northwestern, after the university eliminated the Department of Rhetoric and Communication Studies.


11 See the description of Valarea Jones's performance at a debate held at Towson University in Young, "Colleges Call Debate Contests Out of Order." A20.