Practically Human
College Professors Speak from the Heart of Humanities Education

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Editors
How a Speech Can Change an Audience

Why Studying Public Address Is Important

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On April 4, 1968, a white man shot and killed civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., and black communities across the country reacted in pain and anger. People rioted in 76 American cities, killing 46 people (most of them black) and injuring 2,500; police arrested 30,000 people.¹ Several white politicians blamed the black citizens—and even King himself—for the violence; blacks were angry and distrustful of all whites, especially since a single white man had killed their leader. In this volatile setting, presidential candidate Bobby Kennedy was scheduled to speak in an Indianapolis black neighborhood that night.

Kennedy’s flight was late, and as the large, mostly black crowd gathered to hear him, news of King’s assassination was spreading. Some in the audience began to shout insults at the whites nearest them; whites on the crowd’s edge left in fear. Black militant gangs gathered support as the time passed, making violence more likely. With this crowd, the police were helpless. The local planning committee anx-
iously watched the mass of people, wondering whether Kennedy would be safe; they asked members of a nearby recreation center to check trees and windows for possible assassins.²

When Kennedy’s airplane landed, his staff told him of King’s death and the potential neighborhood violence. Despite the dangers, Kennedy drove to the neighborhood, writing notes for his speech on an envelope. He was going to have to speak extemporaneously—which was unusual for him—and he had only a general idea of what he wanted to say. When he arrived, the crowd was noisy; many in the front had not heard the news about King, so they were still cheering for Bobby. Kennedy stepped up to the microphone and announced, “Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight.” Many audibly gasped; several screamed. Shouts competed with Kennedy’s next words: “Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died for the cause of that effort. In this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of nation we are and what direction we want to move in.”

It seemed that the crowd would erupt in anger and violence, yet Kennedy continued.

We can move in that direction as a country in greater polarization, black amongst blacks and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another; or we can make an effort as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain and bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion, and love. For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred
and distrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man.

Kennedy seemed emotional at this point, and the crowd began to quiet. Kennedy ended his speech:

My favorite poem, my favorite poet, was Aeschylus. He once wrote,

even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget
falls drop by drop upon the heart,
until, in our own great despair,
against our will,
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.

So I ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King . . . but more importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love—a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which I spoke.

The crowd quietly left. Through this speech, Kennedy took a crowd on the brink of violence and calmed them,
recognizing their pain and offering them a different path for action.

When my students watch and listen to this speech in class, they hear the crowd’s reaction and notice Kennedy’s calm presence, the speech’s rhythm, and his themes of peace and justice. Even though we are not Kennedy’s intended audience, we are drawn into his speech. The students are quiet and intent; many say they feel a chill as Kennedy speaks and quiets the crowd. That, I tell my students, is a speech’s potential: not just to persuade but to change an audience and its situation.

The Art of Rhetoric

The art of public speaking—rhetoric—is centuries old. It began in ancient Greece with the Sophists, Plato, and Aristotle, who defined rhetoric as the art of discerning in any given situation the available means of persuasion. Scholars during the Roman Empire further shaped rhetorical study and practice, emphasizing the need for speakers to uphold high ethical standards. Throughout the Renaissance and then again in the eighteenth century, rhetoric flourished. At various times, rhetoric was dismissed as merely empty, meaningless words used to manipulate, but most of rhetoric’s history has emphasized a complex understanding of words, reasoning, audience adaptation, and awareness of situations. The best theorists minimized attention to mere delivery, focusing instead on the art of persuasion. Today, a quick review of the top 100 American speeches (which includes Kennedy’s eulogy) reflects this complex rhetorical approach to public speaking; the great speakers have known how to choose content relevant to their audience and have shaped that content into a memorable message. Kennedy’s
speech is not successful because of his delivery; his speech is successful because it utilizes a variety of rhetorical strategies developed in this centuries-old study.

Despite rhetoric’s great potential to bring change, most students do not want to take the basic public speaking class, nor do they see the value of studying the history of rhetoric or great public addresses. (When I was a graduate student at Penn State University, the public speaking requirement created so much anxiety that some students seriously considered dropping out of the university because of it.) Some students dread being in front of others. Some view a public speaking course as unnecessary. Then there are the few who enjoy performing and expect an easy A in the class simply on that basis. Yet, while it seems like almost no one takes rhetoric seriously early on, former students often tell me how important public speaking has become in their lives. The farmer who became an elder at church and had to speak at congregational meetings; the hairdresser who had to present her recent work to other stylists; the grade school teacher who had to talk to a room of parents and grandparents—none of these people were “born” public speakers, but they came to depend on the skill.

Effective communication is critically important for a variety of jobs. As indicated in countless surveys, strong communication skills are the number-one trait employers look for when hiring—not grade point average, major, or work experience. Intensive study of the discipline of rhetoric and public address (perhaps leading to a major or minor in this area) can prepare students for careers in ministry, law, public relations, journalism, teaching, and—of course—speech writing. Yet even a single public speaking class can help a student no matter his or her major or career goals. For example, I know an accounting major
who recently took an argumentation class after an internship experience showed her that she needed to learn how to present information persuasively.

**Learning Effective Speaking**

An effective speaker considers the audience’s interests and knowledge and crafts a speech around these. The crafting process involves careful research, development of a clear and engaging thesis, construction of logical arguments, stylistic attention to structure and language, and a delivery that impacts the audience. Of course, in the volatile situation of April 4, Bobby Kennedy had just a few moments to prepare, but his knowledge and training served him well under pressure. Students may feel pressures of their own when they have to speak, but having a reliable process for creating speeches can relieve some of the worries they have about their delivery skills.

A very shy and bright secondary education student enrolled in my speech class recently because she had been told by her professors that she needed to project more confidence when she spoke. She dreaded her speeches: she did not like looking at the audience, she didn’t know what to do with her hands, and she spoke so quietly that her classmates could hardly hear most of her words. But once she learned that her grade would reflect not only her delivery but also her topic choice, her organization, and her use of language, she immersed herself in writing, researching, and outlining her speeches. By the time of her last speech of the semester, students in the class were eagerly listening for her poetic phrases and colorful analogies. Her careful crafting had made her a confident and engaging speaker.
Of course, a speech depends on more than poetically crafted phrases. Through the creative process of writing speeches, students also practice developing clear messages and solid arguments. At our college, at the end of every semester, the best speakers from each public speaking course participate in a departmental contest. The judges use criteria that weigh content, organization, and delivery. Occasionally, students who attend the contest question the choices of first-, second-, and third-place winners, pointing to problems with evidence or faulty analogies. I hope students will carry this kind of critical thinking with them into their other classes and into their lives as citizens. Cicero, the Roman statesman and rhetorical scholar, believed that a rhetorical education was necessary for an engaged and thoughtful political life; if students can evaluate a message’s logic, they may be less likely to be swayed by mere charisma.

In her book *Eloquence in an Electronic Age*, communication scholar and news commentator Kathleen Hall Jamieson argues that in the past few decades rhetorical education has declined; students often do not take even one public speaking course. As a result, students not only are missing a chance to practice an art that they will almost certainly be using in their own lives; they also are missing the chance to learn how to listen to and evaluate the speeches of others. Jamieson cautions us about the potential effects on our communities, our states, and our country: If listeners cannot judge the reasoning and rhetoric in a politician’s speech, then they will have to rely on the spin of commentators. If we cannot independently evaluate the political arguments around us, how will we weigh our possibilities and choose particular ways of voting, participating in politics, and engaging with neighbors?
Students who do take a rhetoric class or a public address class gain important skills in learning to become an active part of a community. In a public speaking class, students become a part of an audience: They learn how to listen actively, to provide feedback, and to ask questions. They also learn how to sympathize with each other, because at the semester’s start they all dread getting up in front of a group. In a public address class, students study great speeches, imagining themselves in the audience at that time and place. They develop their skills in identifying with others. On the one hand they consider what it must have been like to be in Bobby Kennedy’s shoes; on the other they imagine what it was like to listen to him on that fateful day in Indianapolis.

Kennedy’s eulogy of Martin Luther King Jr. was one of his best political speeches. His speech exemplified classical rhetorical training and demonstrated his command of language and memory. But his speech is memorable and moving because he identified with his audience—an audience in many ways starkly different from himself. Yet Kennedy spoke to what they shared: an experience of pain, deep sadness, and a longing for a better society. Students of public address appreciate the art and skill of this approach, and hopefully are inspired toward understanding and compassion.

Notes
