

Changing the Atmos'fear' in the Public Speaking Classroom

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Abstract

It is too often the case that a public speaking classroom is one that creates a sense of stress, nervousness and tension in undergraduate students. While many sources offer tips to help students and others prepare successful speeches and get through their presentations (Lucas, 2010; DeVito, 2009; Griffin, 2009; Osborn, Osborn, & Osborn, 2009; Verderber, Verderber, & Sellnow, 2008; Bourne, 2007; Beaver, 2005), few address how instructors may be contributing (i.e., cultural differences and misunderstandings, instructor bias, lack of class time for preparation, and overly strict instructor critique and scoring criteria) to this atmosphere of anxiety and communication apprehension nor what instructors can do specifically to help create an environment where public speaking anxiety can decrease progressively in the classroom. This article will explore some options towards making the speech-learning environment one that lessens the anxiety and fear students experience in the public speaking classroom. For instructors who wish to create a more comfortable public speaking environment in order to help reduce the fear students experience in the public speaking classroom, the authors suggest respecting cultural differences, avoiding instructor bias, using class time for practice, and providing an encouraging classroom atmosphere.

Keywords: public speaking, communication apprehension, instructor bias, classroom environment, teaching techniques, learning styles

As more and more students are required to take communication courses as part of their core curriculum at undergraduate institutions, professors are constantly searching for ways to be innovative. “Communication skills are now taught in a wide range of general education courses, not just those offered by the communication department” (Dunbar, Brooks and Kubica-Miller, 2006, p. 116). In the ever-evolving world of technology, public speaking instructors must stay abreast of the latest methods of obtaining information as well as the tools available to them for instruction. The use of technology is becoming more widespread in the classroom and book publishers are constantly pushing their latest sources to woo departments into adopting their products. While many tools are available to assist both instructor and student, such as CDs, speech labs, videos, PowerPoint, and more, one aspect of the public speaking course remains constant – students approach the course with fear and anxiety. Thus, amidst the five or more required presentations, the outlines, the videotaping, the required visual aid and the ever-dreaded impromptu speech, the question that remains is, ‘What is being done to ease the concerns of the student with the basic fear of standing in front of the audience?’

While many sources offer tips to help students and others prepare successful speeches and get through their presentations (Lucas, 2010; DeVito, 2009; Griffin, 2009; Osborn, Osborn, & Osborn, 2009; Verderber, Verderber, & Sellnow, 2008; Bourne, 2007; Beaver, 2005), few address what instructors can do specifically to help create an environment where public speaking anxiety can decrease progressively in the classroom. This article will explore some options towards making the speech-learning environment one that lessens the anxiety and fear students experience in the public speaking classroom. It is too often the case that a public speaking classroom is one that creates a sense of stress, nervousness and tension in undergraduate students. Communication anxiety, “the range of unpleasant sensations” (Osborn, Osborn, & Osborn, 2009, p. 27) students feel about their speaking assignments, is a common experience in a speech class; therefore, it is important for students to know that it is normal to experience these feelings before and during their speech presentations.

In fact, as many of us know first-hand, “most people experience some level of state anxiety about public speaking” (Griffin, 2009, p. 37). However, too often it is the instructors who (perhaps unknowingly) create an even greater anxiety in the students, and therefore in the classroom environment. The result: students are made to find ways to manage their fear of being rejected academically by their instructors *in addition to* their valid public speaking anxieties. Factors that may contribute to these additional fears include cultural differences and misunderstandings, instructor bias, lack of class time for preparation, and overly strict instructor critique and scoring criteria. In an effort to change the public speaking classroom from an atmos’fear’ of insecurity and anxiety to a classroom environment that enhances the natural communication strengths of its students, the following are suggestions for instructors who wish to create a more comfortable public speaking classroom:

1. Be Aware of Cultural Differences

“Culture [also] plays a significant role in the public speaking encounter” (Williams, in press, p. 193). Cultural differences and misunderstandings can certainly contribute to a public speaking classroom that is uncomfortable and intimidating for students. Cultural differences include gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and several other elements. Instructors need to be aware of how students may perceive these differences as obstacles and how those obstacles may, in turn, lead to more public speaking anxiety. Additionally, culture will certainly affect students’ approach to the course as well as their performance. The course instructor should strive to use the cultural differences as a tool for positive regard, creating an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Consider the student from a culture where women’s voices are not valued. A female student from that culture may not feel comfortable standing before a group to espouse her views because her background has taught her that what she has to say is of no importance. Her perspective may make it difficult for her to speak loudly or confidently. Instructors who are aware of this will be able to encourage effectively without offending. They will also be in a position to demonstrate to the other students that different presentational styles can be acceptable and that they can especially encourage students who may have apprehensions that stem from places other than the classroom.

Wood (2005) encourages public speaking instructors to acknowledge others’ perspectives and attempt to adopt those perspectives. Incorporating activities that allow students to recognize the importance of culture on a communication event can be quite useful. Focusing on co-cultures “allows students to practice recognizing the role of culture in the creation and understanding of their speeches” (Williams, in press, p. 193). Knowing that the instructor recognizes the importance of culture and seeks to share that information with the class will make it easier for students to focus more on their speech development and less on the potential for cultural misunderstandings.

2. Try to Avoid Instructor Bias

Although there is no way to account for every element of subjectivity in grading, instructors should try to avoid instructor bias. Respecting others’ cultural positions and resisting the natural inclination of ethnocentrism can help create a more inviting classroom (Wood, 2005). In a study by Turman & Barton (2004), individual rater bias was reported as the most significant type of assessment error. Several factors contributed to errors in evaluating student speech presentations, including rating speakers as too high or too low, being too easy or hard on a specific criterion, and being influenced by the speaking order. In a study by Mottet & Beebe (2006), “student nonverbal and verbal responsive behaviors positively influence instructor assessments of student speech grades accounting for 8% and 11% of the variance, respectively.” Research shows that instructor bias is real – affecting evaluations of student speeches as well as academic self-esteem.

Rudebock (2009) addresses an important issue regarding the way we, as educators, sometimes approach the evaluation of student work. At times instructors may forget the humanity of the student; while this may often be a result of hearing years’ worth of poor excuses for inadequate effort on the part of the students, Rudebock reminds us that we must “be aware that students are people often dealing with major life issues while getting their education. We do not need a degree in psychology or a background in social work to teach; we need only make a human connection with our students” (p. 64). By connecting with our students and being mindful of the diversity of experience in which they exist, we are able to acknowledge the humanity of our students too often overshadowed by our individual biases. If public speaking instructors will identify their personal preferences, then they can move away from awarding points or deducting points simply based on what they like or dislike. Speech professors should attempt to focus on criteria that research and scholars have shown to be effective in public speaking.

By clearly articulating that criteria in the classroom, students benefit from having the opportunity and resources to craft their individual speeches with the evaluation criteria in mind, and professors benefit from using an objective evaluation tool that serves as a standard by which any speech could be fairly graded. While it is not practical to assume that professors can remove all subjective analysis, they should strive to grade fairly regardless of idiosyncrasies such as favoring students who volunteer to speak first, or who claim to have practiced the most, or whose verbal or nonverbal responsiveness cues are in line with the instructor's personal preferences. Nor should the instructors weigh too heavily on one aspect of speech presentations, such as eye contact or source citation. Finding balance is crucial – a proper balance of strong academic standards and expectations, along with acknowledgement of the diversity of student experiences that exist in our classrooms can be tremendously effective in avoiding instructor bias.

3. Use Class Time for Preparation and Practice

“Students appear to become better communicators through instruction and practice” (Pearson, Child & Kahl, Jr., 2006, p. 352). Most public speaking instructors and public speaking textbooks alert students to the importance of preparation and practice as key elements in making competent, if not, superior speech presentations. However, students may fare better overall if they are more than instructed to prepare and practice, but are actually provided with classroom time to do so. By incorporating this teaching technique, instructors may have more impact on the students' comfort level by providing opportunities for them to practice in class where there is a supportive and present audience. Students can then monitor their progress from a perspective beyond their own as well as gain experience standing before an audience. An additional benefit of this teaching approach is ensuring that students will in fact prepare and practice their speeches before the graded presentation, as instructors cannot control nor monitor their students' practice time outside of the classroom. Allowing students time to practice in class may prompt them to prepare more (and earlier) outside of class. Students will benefit from receiving helpful critique as they practice their speeches in class, incorporating the suggestions of their instructor and peers when practicing at home. Moreover, in class practice time will decrease the amount of anxiety students feel about making a 'good grade' because they will have benefitted from both professional and peer evaluation and instruction prior to the graded presentation.

Ayres (1996) found that students with high levels of communication apprehension spend more time developing and writing their speeches and less time practicing. While it is clear that preparation is a necessary key to successful public speaking, it is not sufficient. Practicing the actual speech delivery is a must. One way to help ease this communication apprehension, and encourage practice, is to demonstrate its importance by doing practice exercises in class. For example, students can do exercises where they are given topics and asked to create a 30-second attention-getter, and then present them to the class. Other exercises such as reading excerpts from stories or doing mock question and answer sessions with the students standing before the class can help ease anxiety. These types of activities can aid students with vocal variety and nonverbal elements of their presentations. It can also provide them with time to gain a greater sense of comfort with standing in front of a live audience. Isolating this type of 'hands-on' experience to graded presentations only increases anxiety levels in students, thereby limiting their ability and confidence to improve as public speakers. Other benefits of this teaching technique include creating a welcoming and positive classroom atmosphere as well as cultivating camaraderie and support among the students and between students and the instructor.

By having the class participate in practice deliveries and constructive feedback, students have the opportunity to learn new skills in new ways. Some comments will be the same for different students, but the repetition can be a good learning tool for the students. Further, the instructor can observe the degree to which the students are not only improving as speakers, but also improving as critical listeners – providing the instructor with the opportunity to offer more specific assistance to each student. The combination of these learning tools should effectively improve the performance of the public speaking students. Additionally, some instructors reserve class time for projects that specifically address the fear of public speaking. In doing so, students have the opportunity to discuss what it is about public speaking that frightens them (McKenzie, 2007). Instructors can use class time to share with students how they managed to become comfortable standing before a class on a regular basis. McKenzie (2007) asserts that “as public speaking and education professors, each time we stand before our college students, we are faced with the task of not only *teaching* the required material but also *being an example* of that which we are teaching” (p. 12). Removing the veil and allowing students to see that their instructors were once new, nervous public speakers like them, but have effectively been able to manage that anxiety, can ease student tension and establish a kind of common ground between instructor and student.

It is important for the speech professor to “be a good role model as a speaker in class” (Boyd, 2008, p.7). Instructors can use their personal anecdotes to illustrate their sincerity and concern for student success. In fact, McKenzie and Saunders (2007) offer two learning objectives for the initial classes of the public speaking course: (1) to help students realize that fear of public speaking can be managed effectively and (2) to create a non-threatening environment in which students receive positive feedback about their performances (p. 53). When instructors make it clear from the beginning that they are not there to penalize students, but rather to encourage and inspire achievement, students can begin their public speaking learning on a positive note.

4. Be More Encouraging and Less Punitive

Students are likely to feel less stress in the classroom if instructors use more time encouraging them and less time alerting them to all the flaws that cause them to lose points. Part of encouraging students can be providing verbal and nonverbal confirmation and validation. The more positive feedback students receive, the more students will improve. Naturally, that does not mean that students are not to receive constructive critique, but it is important to remember that the manner in which the instructor provides feedback, both positive and negative, affects the learning environment.

Before and after their classes, students often discuss their academic concerns with each other, and their comments reveal their anxiety – often not about the presentation, but anxiety or concern about making the professor happy. Students make comments such as, “You’re not dressed up enough. You know you will lose points for that.” We have also watched students practice their speeches with the technology they are required to use, while nervously making comments about how they will lose points if everything does not go exactly right. These examples indicate that in addition to students’ normal public speaking anxiety, they are fearful of the instructor who, by their perception, expects them to be perfect in every aspect of the speechmaking process – thereby creating (whether intentional or not) an atmosphere of fear. In some instances, speech professors are so determined to dispel the myth of the speech course being an ‘easy A’ that they are missing the opportunity to create a classroom environment that encourages student success in public speaking; an environment that ultimately enhances their own teaching effectiveness. Instructors should, instead, create a learning environment in which students do not dread the day of their presentations due to a fixation with the fear of losing points. Public speaking teachers should encourage all students to look forward to delivering their speeches and to consider their speeches presentations as an opportunity to demonstrate improvement while sharing important information with their peers .

The goal should be to have students work toward a sense of accomplishment, rather than being overwhelmed by fear and developing an attitude of ‘Let me get this over with.’ Weissberg & Lamb (1977) found that helping students renegotiate negative thought processes about speech presentations was effective in reducing fear and anxiety. Turning public speaking into an event to look forward to can help students become better communicators overall.

Instructors can create a positive atmosphere with the help of their students in the classroom. One way is to get students to commit to being supportive of one another. For example, some instructors have students applaud the presenters both before and after their speeches – this sets a tone in the classroom that indicates that each presenter is valid just for being there, even before they have spoken the first word in their speech. Also, instructors can invite students to share positive comments after the presentations. If instructors encourage their students to view their class as a unit with a common goal that they can reach together, the students will feel an important sense of agency that will positively affect student success. Dunbar, Brooks, & Kubicka-Miller (2006) note that “A basic communication course can offer students knowledge of effective communication techniques and provide a safe arena for developing and practicing skills, which can create positive feelings about communicating in the future” (p. 117).

Summary

Experiencing fear and anxiety during a public speaking situation is common. Students in undergraduate institutions must face that anxiety as they work through the public speaking course. It is the responsibility of the speech instructor to develop and maintain a classroom environment that does not augment that speech apprehension, but one that provides comfort and encouragement for students. Respecting cultural differences, avoiding instructor bias, using class time for practice, and providing an encouraging atmosphere will help reduce the fear students experience in the public speaking classroom. Utilizing the suggestions aforementioned will help instructors create an atmosphere where students look forward to giving their presentations, rather than dreading them.

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