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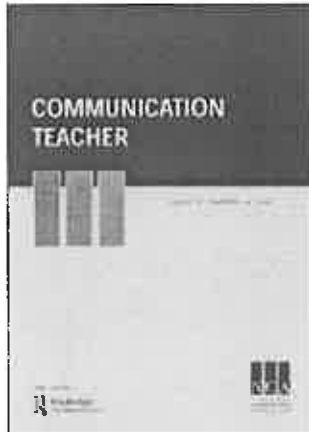
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Side-Coaching the Public Speech: Toward Improvisational Delivery Adjustments *in the Moment*

Don J. Waisanen & Rodney A. Reynolds

Objectives: Students “feel” what it is like to stretch their delivery range (i.e., vocal variety, tone, non-verbal movements, etc.) and learn to adjust their communication to the rhetorical constraints of a speech presentation “in the moment”

Courses: Public Speaking (or any course where speaking is required)

Introduction and Rationale

A post-speech evaluation, suggesting improvements for future presentations, is typical in the public speaking course. Students may adjust to the suggested changes—such as “You rarely look up and when you do glance toward the audience, it’s only for a moment. Your next speech requires significant improvement in eye contact” (Smith & King, 2004, pp. 209–210)—for the next speech, but are not afforded an opportunity to make changes *in the moment* during the actual presentation. Moreover, while most public speaking courses emphasize *thinking* about better delivery, little attention is given to what better delivery *feels* like. If the goal is to cultivate a generation of truly extemporaneous speakers, then it is imperative to guide students toward more *improvisational* speech delivery.

The first author took a class in improvisation (improv) with a theater group in Los Angeles. To teach the rules of improv, the instructor interjected comments *during* the students’ improvised scenes, in addition to debriefing the class afterward. A classic rule for improv actors, for example, is to establish at the beginning of a scene “who” they are to their audience. If this information was not offered in the first few lines, the instructor would shout out “tell us *who* you are,” to extract the information *while* the scene was being constructed. After a few of these *side-coaching* sessions, students started making the adjustments automatically. As speech teachers, the authors realized this “side-coaching” could also be effective in public speaking pedagogy.

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Rather than giving feedback to students only *after* speech presentations, side-coaching *during* an in-class public speaking exercise may bring additional positive outcomes.

Intense and immediate *feedback* fosters habit formation (Erev & Barron, 2005). Recipients also tend to prefer collective and positive feedback experiences (Eggert, West, & Thomas, 2004). Our activity provides sharp and rapid feedback with students reporting a positive collective experience of the side-coaching activity. Further, immediate and comprehensible feedback from credible sources enhances performance when students are open to receiving feedback (King, Young, & Behnke, 2000). In our experience, students are open to side-coaching feedback, and reporting it helps them overcome excessive feedback sensitivity (Smith & King, 2004). Our students find the delay between giving a speech and getting feedback frustrating. Informative feedback presented at the time of the presentation, however, aids in learning basic skills (Mathan & Koedinger, 2005) making side-coaching the type of exercise that can quickly guide students toward improved delivery.

Explanation of Activity

The instructor gathers a number of printed speeches, one for each student in the class. The instructor should be familiar with the speeches but does not need a copy of each speech, since the focus will be on providing immediate feedback regarding delivery and interpretation of the text. We encourage using a wide range of speeches to keep the content diverse and interesting. Speeches may be found on American-Rhetoric.com or through Internet searches for such terms as “dramatic monologues” or “advertisements.”

For a class of 15 students, the whole activity takes about 45 minutes. This provides time for each student to give a 2-minute manuscript reading, while leaving 10–15 minutes for debriefing. The exercise can also be conducted over two or three class sessions, giving students more time to try the exercise and leaving additional room for discussion, especially in larger classes.

The instructor should distribute the speeches randomly and provide students 3–5 minutes to read through them silently. Students are to deliver a “straight manuscript reading” (with a caveat of “you will normally be giving your speeches extemporaneously, but this exercise is going to help focus specifically on delivery”). Reading the speeches verbatim frees up students’ subtextual energies to focus on delivery over content or structure. The instructor should then inform the students that they will be safely guided with instructions like “scan the room with eye contact” or “use your hands to make your next few points” while they deliver their speech. Each student should then make adjustments *in the moment* as they deliver the speech. The activity is not graded so as to reduce anxiety students might feel while taking risks to expand their delivery range.

The instructor should randomly select students to read their speeches in front of the class and encourage the class to clap and cheer for each student to help create a supportive atmosphere. As each student begins to read the speech, the instructor

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should take mental note of areas for improvement. Are they making eye contact? How is their volume? Do they only read at a fast rate? Based on these observations, the instructor should prompt the student with cues like “look at Jimmy, then at Karen,” “be really quiet on the next line,” or “slow, slow, slo-o-o-o-wer.” The first goal is to promote a conversational delivery style. Students are often surprised to see a classmate with an average speaking style turn into a dynamic communicator through such *in the moment* adjustments. Once the student has had a little practice *feeling* this difference, the second goal is to take the student even further, trying out different elements of vocal variety, facial expression, and motivated movement. Examples of possible cues include “use both of your hands to make your point in the next line,” “speak in a deep voice,” or even, “an enthusiastic crowd of your supporters has just come into the room in the middle of your speech, be sure to acknowledge their presence.”

Sometimes it helps to give the *audience* cues such as “cheer for the speaker on the next line” to develop a supportive and congenial atmosphere. Once this atmosphere is established, it is helpful to offer even more challenging cues like, “a loud plane is flying overhead and distracting the audience from your speaking,” or “Sean, please shake your head in disagreement with the speaker on that last point,” and “Speaker, try to find ways to connect with Sean by pleading to him with vocal variety.” These more challenging cues do not upset the supportive atmosphere once the instructor has fostered a playful, positive space for speaker delivery and audience interaction. The cues can also encourage students to reflect on how to make adjustments in real public speaking situations. While it is useful to employ the standard delivery criteria for student speeches (i.e., conversational delivery, eye contact, etc.), the instructor can also bring up additional cues, depending on the needs and comfort level of the class.

Debriefing

Completion of the activity is followed by a class discussion about the way students felt, what kinds of delivery adjustments worked for them, and what did not. Once some of the students share their thoughts, peer feedback should be encouraged. The instructor should ask students to discuss some of the positive adjustments they saw their classmates make. Students are typically excited about the exercise and willing to talk about their experiences. Students learn both from analyzing others’ delivery and from others’ analyses of their delivery. Finally, instructors should foster connections between the activity and course concepts such as constraints in the rhetorical situation and audience adaptation.

Appraisal

After several years of teaching with this technique, we have found side-coaching to be an effective means for having students *feel* what it is like to adjust their speech delivery *in the moment* of presenting it. Students appear more conversational, spontaneous, and lively as a result. Students consistently comment that they both

“had fun” and “learned about delivery” in this process. Through our own teaching and conversations with other instructors, we have found that delivery is usually the most lacking skill in students’ speeches. We believe side-coaching offers a paradigmatic shift toward more dynamic speech training that enhances delivery skill.

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