Teaching Public Speaking Courses Online Offers more than a Convenient Alternative

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Abstract

Online Public Speaking classes do not offer students an escape to facing an audience. They are not simply a convenient alternative to instructor's shortage or a response to a trend. Providing the same material, pursuing the same learning outcomes, and containing the same challenges, online Public Speaking classes challenge students' anxiety, learning skills, presentation skills, as well as their story telling skills. It provides a safe environment for students to explore their public personalities and their potential to communicate with masses on the internet. Instead of learning these skills in a delimited space with a measurable audience, the online students investigate new media and acquire a sense of public responsibility in their message. Online Public Speaking classes are not competing with face-to-face Public Speaking classes. The experience is different, but identical in academic content and worth. The online format is not an opportune substitute, but can be part of teaching the necessary skills our students need to acquire to face the current societal challenges.

Keywords: Public Speaking, online education, technical education, public speaking anxiety.

Teaching public speaking courses online is not only a marketable option for higher education; it is also a way to adapt to students' practices and business and industry's expectations. Social media and virtual public expression are accessible to everyone who has access to an internet connection in the United States; however, as the media grows faster than academia can research it, users are also students and employees. Teaching face-to-face Public Speaking courses offers a chance for students to understand the intricate rules of speaking in public, shaping and presenting a coherent message, and taking the audience's diversity into consideration. In offering the same course, with the same objectives, but online, students have a virtual experience of the same issues. Using the same tools, the same material, and following the same standards, students are challenged to build their public identity and reflect on the implication of sharing their message not only to a defined audience, but also to virtual masses.

Public Speaking and Online Learning in Technical Education in Georgia.

The Public Speaking course is part of the core classes that most degree programs in technical education require. The Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) develops standards for each class and ensures that these standards meet both business and industry expectations. Online learning for the Technical Colleges of Georgia is coordinated on the Georgia Virtual Technical College (GVTC) platform. Each Technical College in Georgia offering online classes uses Angel Learning which recently merged with Blackboard. There are currently twenty-six Technical Colleges participating on GVTC, twenty five programs available, and one hundred and eight courses available.

"Computer technology increasingly is being incorporated into communication instruction as it is in many other discipline" (Clarke & Jones, 2001, p. 109). There are no differences in the TCSG standards between the online and the face-to-face Public Speaking class. Both require the same work, involve the same objectives, competencies, and assignments. The channel is different, but the message remains the same. The classes also use the same text, the same tuition, and yield the same amount of credit on the students' transcript.

Public Speaking and Anxiety

Public Speaking is a popular class in technical education in the State of Georgia; not because students find the class enjoyable, but because the class is a requirement for most degree programs. Public speaking anxiety is unsurprisingly the cornerstone of an avoidance and attraction type of relationship. The students need this class because they are afraid of public speaking, and the students are afraid of taking this class because they will have to speak in public. Many scholars (Lomas, 1944; Spielberger, 1966; McCroskey, 1978; Behnke & Beatty, 1981; Sawer & Behnke, 1999; Behnke & Sawer, 2001) investigated the relationship between anxiety and public speaking. Studies from Benke & Sawer (1999) as well as from Hu & Romasn-Kroll (1995) suggested that there is an "association between speech anxiety and the differing types of speaking assignments typically given in basic undergraduate communication courses" (Witt, 2006, p. 168).

Interestingly, the highest level of anxiety has been reported before the presentation even began and arose when the students realized the potential threats that the situation may imply (Behnke & Sawyer, 1999). Witt (2006) demonstrated that the order of the assignments (from relatively simple to difficult), as well as the type of speech (informative, persuasive, impromptu, or extemporaneous) had an impact on how well students managed their anxiety. Accordingly, if instructors seek to reduce public speaking anxiety in their students, changing students' perception of threats and practicing various types of speeches in a non threatening environment are the most efficient methods.

Traditional and Online Formats

In a contested report, Thomas Russell (1999) compiled over 355 reports, papers, and summaries related to distance education. Later, Mensotis & Phipps (1999) concluded that most of what had been published was opinions and instructions. Moreover, Althaus (1997) prevented the debate to present computer-based learning as the panacea. If online education is an extension of distance education, it is not, however, the answer to all questions in terms of education and learning strategies.

Teaching Public Speaking online requires the students to have a computer, a reliable internet connection, and media tools such as webcams or camcorders. Some Technical Colleges will provide the students access to the necessary equipment. In order for the course to challenge only public speaking skills, the students need to be comfortable using their computers, understanding the Angel Learning environment, and quite instinctive when it comes to using social media such as YouTube. The students receive their material, their directions, and their course material via Angel Learning. There are deadlines, the work is structured, and the attendance is checked and measured by the numbers of times the students log on their classes.

Students who choose an online Public Speaking class believing that the online format is easier than the face-to-face format are under the wrong impression. If students are choosing online Public Speaking classes to avoid speaking in public and therefore believe reducing their anxiety in the class, they are also under the wrong impression. Clark & Jones (2001) found in their research comparing traditional and online formats in a Public Speaking course that communication apprehension in the students did not differ in either formats. There was also no significant difference in terms of self-assessment of public speaking skills between the two

formats: the students had learned and worked on their skills in both formats.

When students choose an online class for its format (flexible schedule, availability anywhere there is an internet connection, self-directed), they are under the right impression; however, if they would rather have a lecture-based class, but they choose an online class because no face-to-face classes are available, they will be frustrated. The success of any students in an online Public Speaking class starts therefore with a good advisement.

Public speaking as Developing a Public Personality

Whether face-to-face or online, one of the byproducts of the Public Speaking course is to provide a safe environment for students to create their public personalities. Public Speaking courses do improve students' perception in their public speaking skills (Ford & Wolvin, 1992, 1993; Kramer & Hinton, 1996). They have to weigh what information and what emotions will make them credible in their topics, their opinions, and their presentations of themselves. They learn that communication is an equation with three principle variables: the speaker, the message, and the audience. Each part of the equation is essential. They learn that they are more than just a person. They are also spokespeople for their ideas, their messages, their beliefs, minorities, majorities, etc. They work on selecting information and organizing it in a meaningful and purposeful manner. Finally, they learn that they are important individuals, with a significant message, communicating with essential other individuals.

In a face-to-face classroom setting, students will interact and learn from other students' feedback. In an online setting, the camera and the internet are between the speaker and the audience; however, it does not constitute a safer environment than the classroom. The online students will speak to masses, whereas face-to-face students will interact with a classroom. Posting a video on YouTube is open for anyone, anywhere to see; presenting a speech in a classroom has a beginning, an end, and a limited audience. Moreover, online students have the opportunity to look at their videos and criticize their own work before they publish it online. Previous research (Quigley & Nyquist, 1992; Bankston & Terlip, 1994) shows the importance video feedback may provide to students. Hinton and Kramer (1998) found that self-directed viewing of videos had only a small impact on students' self-perception; however, it helped students with "low competency levels to gain more confidence" (p. 158). Therefore, it seems like students who would choose an online class to reduce

anxiety are actually selecting the very tool that may help them work on their confidence.

Students did not wait for Public Speaking courses to communicate. In the same token, they did not wait for this class to be offered online to use social media. Academic courses need to constantly reassess and adapt their content and their channel to best prepare students for the current societal challenges (Hugenberg & Yoder, 1991). If students already express themselves online and use social media, it is not only convenient and marketable to teach Public Speaking online, but it is also necessary to provide the tool to reflect, learn, and model behaviors.

Story Telling and Public Speaking

"We use stories to define ourselves, to make sense of our world, and to create community" (Bishop & Kimball, 2006, p. 28). Social media increasingly provides tools to document, comment, and share users' stories. It is relatively effortless and ordinary to create a profile on Facebook, open an account on YouTube, or share professional resumes on LinkedIn, for instance. Anyone can share pictures, movies, and promote his or her own career online.

During a Public Speaking course, students learn to present themselves, influence their audience, and lead a message. They tell a story and define their role; they perform as their own self-defined character. Since everyone shares their own stories, online or face-to-face, students reinforce their oral and listening skills (Caulfield, 2000; Groce, 2001). Also, "story telling is fun, suspenseful, exciting, thought provoking" (Bishop & Kimball, 2006, p.29).

Performing in telling their own story, students can learn how to present themselves in face-to-face situations, and also in new challenges posed by virtual environments. Making a speech and presenting it as story telling can be a pleasurable assignment that can help modify the perceptions of students that public speaking is about threatening assignments in nerve racking situations. The students can produce a speech that is their story as easily as they organize their information on social media profiles. When presenting their speeches, students take their stories seriously, their message is genuine, and they touch their audience. In realizing that public speaking is telling a story, leading an audience, and in today's society of information, potentially touching masses, Public Speaking courses answer the challenge of our generation.

Conclusion

Online Public Speaking courses present the same material, require the same assignments, and follow the same standards as of face-to-face courses; however, the online format presents the advantage of confronting students with today's societal challenges: managing their online public image and stories. Whether the skills learned in a face-to-face Public Speaking course can be transferred to virtual environments as well as the transferability of the skills learned in an online environment are questions to be investigated in further research; however, there is more to online Public Speaking courses than a convenient alternative to face-to-face instruction. It does not provide an escape to public speaking assignments, does not reduce public speaking anxiety, but provides the same opportunity to work on public speaking skills. Moreover, the online setting offers a safe environment to improve confidence and be confronted to interesting virtual communication challenges.

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