

# Web-Based Rhetorical Training – A Virtual Impossibility? Problems and Perspectives of Improving Public Speaking Skills in Virtual Learning Environments

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## ABSTRACT

Judging by the opinion of many experts and practitioners, it is virtually impossible to improve public speaking skills in virtual learning environments. Nevertheless, web-based rhetorical trainings do exist. This paper takes a closer look at these trainings and discusses the challenges and perspectives of developing and improving public speaking skills via web-based training.

**Keywords:** Rhetorical Education, Public Speaking Education, eLearning, WBT, VLE

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In our modern information society, the ability to communicate persuasively and efficiently in various contexts and modes is considered to be one of the most important keys to any individual's personal and professional success [1]. Accordingly, public speaking education, the roots of which reach far back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, is once again booming in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This "rhetorical turn" [2] in education is evidenced by the clearly observable, but not yet statistically recorded increase of academic departments and secondary, higher and further education courses in this field.

This being the case, it is rather striking that public speaking skills are still mainly trained in brick-and-mortar classrooms. Are rhetoric instructors not quite ready for eLearning? Or are modern information and communication technologies (ICT) not suitable for enhancing rhetorical skills?

Many experts and practitioners are of the opinion that public speaking skills – just like teamwork, problem solving, intercultural competence, time management and other kinds of social skills – can only be improved in face-to-face-situations. They argue that education in this field demands learning environments which closely resemble the situations in which the acquired skill is actually applied and performed [3], [4].

Of course, there are other, less skeptical views [5], [6], and web-based rhetorical trainings do exist. But do these trainings meet the particularities and requirements of rhetorical education, e.g. regular performance appraisal? Moreover, do they fully exploit the potential of the Web and the wide range of possibilities offered by modern ICT, e.g. two-way communication? And are there areas in which online courses in

public speaking are in fact more effective than face-to-face courses?

The paper begins with an outline of the features and basic requirements of public speaking education. Subsequently, the paper takes a closer look at selected online courses in public speaking in order to explore if and how these basic requirements can be met in web-based trainings. Finally, the paper discusses problems and perspectives of training public speaking skills in virtual learning environments from a general point of view, implicitly integrating my experiences as the developer and instructor of a web-based public speaking course offered at Tübingen University, Germany.

## 2. FEATURES AND REQUIREMENTS OF RHETORICAL / PUBLIC SPEAKING EDUCATION

In order to explore problems and perspectives of web-based public speaking courses, one first needs to consider the general characteristics and basic requirements of rhetorical education. Due to the fact that no modern subject didactics resp. teaching methodology for the field of rhetoric resp. public speaking exists – at least not in monographic form –, the following outline is based on the analysis of prevalent methods and objectives of public speaking education, past and present, recent evaluations of rhetoric courses, and the findings of modern educational theory.

### Long Term Course of Study

Successful public speaking requires a complex set of skills, e.g. insight into the mechanisms of communication, presentation skills, or the ability to anticipate audience-reactions [7] [8] [9] [10]. These objectives can not be achieved after three weekends, two days or even in a few hours. Crash courses in public speaking can, of course, reveal individual deficiencies or give first insights into the mechanisms of public speaking. But, as recent evaluations of rhetorical trainings have revealed, only a *long term course of study*, that is, at least five to ten consecutively organized units or lessons, can guarantee sustainable learning results, i.e. a significant enhancement of public speaking skills [10] [11] [12] [13].

### Adequate Balance Between Theory and Practice

Although learning by doing is essential for rhetorical education [9], public speaking courses should avoid being exclusively based on practical activities. Rather, they should aim at an *adequate balance between theory and practice*, between 'knowing that' and 'knowing how' [9]. When practical activities dominate and the techniques are only applied to particular situations, the learners can scarcely make generalisations allowing them to transfer the techniques to new situations [11] [15]. But the mere acquisition of knowledge, the unreflected memorization of general rules, is not sufficient, either. If it is not put to use in authentic settings, i.e. in situations where it is potentially applicable, the acquired knowledge can not be transferred [16].

### Exemplary models

*Sample speeches, exemplary models*, particularise the general rules, thereby providing a deeper level of understanding which enables better retention. By observing, reflecting on and discussing examples of appropriate or inappropriate speeches, the learners can sharpen their judgement, their rhetorical calculus, and develop critical analytical skills. While samples of bad speeches can be used to illustrate typical problems and avoidable techniques of public speaking, samples of good speeches can serve as models for the individual learner's own rhetorical practice [3] [6] [18].

### Programme of Coherent Exercise

Each speaking situation requires a different strategy, depending on the respective audience, setting, purpose, and topic. A *programme of coherent exercise*, that is, constant, regular engagement in activities that offer various opportunities to immerse the general knowledge and rules in concrete contexts and realistic settings, can prepare the learner for dealing with various public speaking situations, thus enabling him develop appropriate strategies autonomically in each case [10] [11] [15] [17]. Additionally, the exercises have a psychological effect, since the learner can gain confidence and cope with stage fright in 'playful' settings [19].

### Individualized Feedback

Since the success of a public speech is highly dependant on the individual speaker [21], public speaking courses should always offer opportunities for regular, *individualized feedback* from experts and peers. Regular, constructive performance appraisal enables the learner to reflect on and transform his or her individual practice and develop an authentic, appropriate personal style [10] [14]. Moreover, this form of collaborative learning with experts and peers leads to a deeper processing of the learning content [21].

The above-mentioned basic requirements for rhetorical education principally apply to to any kind of public speaking training, be it in schools, at universities, or in further education, be it in the brick-and-mortar classroom or in virtual learning environments.

## 3. WEB-BASED RHETORICAL TRAININGS – STATE OF THE ART

In the following, the term "web-based rhetorical training" is applied to courses that aim at enhancing public speaking skills and mainly (at least 50 per cent) take place in the Internet. This definition excludes trainings that use a website supplementary to a face-to-face course for providing, for example, additional material or tools for communicating outside the classroom [22]. When taking a closer look at web-based rhetorical trainings, one can identify two main types: (1) Those offered entirely online; and (2) hybrid courses [23], i.e. trainings that combine online lessons with face-to-face meetings.

### Trainings offered entirely online

Trainings of this first type usually provide text-based information (i.e. essential theory, rules) that is complemented by written, audio, or audio-visual samples, sometimes accompanied by checklists, quizzes, and other kinds of activities. Some of these courses are permanently accessible and thus designed for self-directed learning not bound to any concrete schedules. Others, however, are only accessible for a certain amount of time and bound to a given dateline.

The module "*Die Kunst der Rede*" (The Art of Speaking) [24] can be accessed permanently. This public speaking course, which is provided by the Ministry of Education in Baden-Württemberg (Southern Germany), is designed for teachers, parents and pupils. "*Die Kunst der Rede*" consists of four units (e.g. rhetorical figures) which are not arranged in any discernable order and can thus be studied independant of each other. The units offer text-based general information and thumb-rules which are supplemented by links to handouts for teachers (e.g. on brainstorming methods), written, visual, and audio examples, a written excerpt of Tucholsky's satirical "Advice for a bad (good) speaker", and further references. Since no suggestions for activities or exercises are integrated in the respective units, the theoretical input, the 'knowing that', clearly dominates this module.

Another example of this type, titled "*Effective Presentations*", can be found on the website of the BBC [25]. The module is designed for "level 2-learners" and consists of an introduction and three organized units (e.g. getting content). It is arranged in accordance with the process of preparing an oral presentation and built around a concrete task situated within the target group's horizon of experience (i.e. a four-minute talk on the popularity of a TV soap opera). The units consist of instructions, thumb-rules, tips, check-lists, and online-activities, e.g. a drag-and-drop exercise for selecting appropriate topics which generates automatized feedback on whether the answers were correct or not.

The entirely online public speaking courses considered so far neglect communication tools that allow individualized feedback and two-way communication between teacher and learner, not least because no course instructor or tutor is involved. Standardized, automatized responses are, of course, appropriate for subjects in which factual knowledge plays an important role. But for public speeches there is never *the* correct solution, since every occasion requires a different strategy, depending on the purpose, topic, audience, setting, and, of course, the individual speaker.

Other courses do integrate possibilities for two-way communication and individual learning experiences. So, for example, the courses entitled "*Public Communication (Online)*" offered at the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences (Humanities Division) at the NSU Florida. The courses are

addressed to Bachelor students and are all constructed similarly. One of the courses, offered in the Winter, 2008 semester [26], consists of 17 units. As regards the theoretical input, one to two chapters of a designated text book, also available as an E-book, are to be read for every unit. These reading assignments are accompanied by 12 activities including:

- a text-based self-introduction which is submitted on the class homepage,
- four speeches (introduction, demonstration, exposition, persuasive speech) held and recorded at a place selected by the participants (e.g. at home) and then (e)mailed to the course instructor, who gives individual feedback to these performances,
- speech preparatory-assignments (e.g. outline of topics for demonstration speech) which are typed and submitted to the assignment dropbox of the virtual learning environment,
- one analysis of a live speech selected and attended by the respective students, and
- one mid-term and one final exam on certain chapters of the text book (multiple choice, true/false, short answer and two short essays).

A further requirement of this course is the regular involvement in online-discussions on various 'topics of the week,' i.e. public speaking related issues, with classmates and the course instructor. Self-quizzes, crossword-puzzles, internet exercises, and other activities available within each unit can be processed voluntarily.

Other public speaking courses offered purely online are designed very similarly to the ones of the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences, often only varying in the way the speech assignments are to be delivered. Participants of the "*Public Speaking Online*"-course offered at Darton College, Georgia [27], for example, are requested to hold the recorded speeches in front of a real audience consisting of at least five freely selected people (e.g. family members, friends); participants of the online-course "*Fundamentals of Public Speaking*" offered at the Minot State University, North Dakota, have the option of delivering their speeches on site on designated dates if they don't have the necessary video equipment or simply prefer this way of delivery [28]. This last-mentioned example is situated on the borderline between purely online and hybrid public speaking courses.

### Hybrid courses

The majority of the hybrid public speaking courses provide the course material and diverse tools for communication and collaboration on the course homepage, while many of the practical activities, i.e. the performance of the speech assignments, take place in the traditional classroom (as opposed to freely chosen, "informal" settings of many purely online courses).

The course "*Rede- und Präsentationskompetenz*" (Public Speaking and Presentation Competence), for example, which is offered by the Rhetoric Department of Tübingen University, Germany [29], is designed in the above-mentioned way. It is addressed to students of all faculties, subjects and levels aiming to develop and expand their public speaking and presentation skills. "*Rede- und Präsentationskompetenz*" lasts one semester (14-week term) and consists of twelve weekly processed online-lessons and two face-to-face meetings in the middle and at the end of the term. Every lesson comprises three learning phases:

- (1) In the *Reception Phase* (Monday to Wednesday), the students look through the multimedia learning material (lecture videos, slides, glossary), thereby getting acquainted with theoretical aspects, general rules and

techniques of public speaking. The twenty to thirty-minute lecture videos are the main instructional tool and consist of exemplary and analytical sequences, moving from familiar situations – i.e. problems, circumstances, and matters situated within the learner's horizon of experience – to general rules and techniques.

- (2) In the *Production Phase* (Thursday to Sunday), the students engage in practical activities, in exercises, which they submit electronically. These written exercises are complemented by two face-to-face meetings in which the students apply their acquired skills in front of a "real" audience, i.e. their fellow students and the academic staff (course instructor, tutors), who directly appraise the individual performances.
- (3) In the *Reflection Phase* (Monday to Thursday, parallel to the reception of the next lesson), the students' individual, electronically submitted assignments are appraised by the academic staff as well as the other participants. If required, the participants can review their solutions or respond to the feedback, either on the platform or via e-mail.

Apart from the multimedia teaching material and the online-platform via which the individual solutions to the exercises are discussed, the virtual learning environment of the course provides references to samples (literature, links to famous speeches) and further tools for communication and collaboration: In a moderated *discussion forum*, the students can post general comments and questions on the course, particular lessons or technological aspects. A consultation hour with the course instructor, offered once a week, takes place in a *chat room*. Individual questions can also be processed to the academic staff via email.

Being involved in this course as an instructor, I have access to the evaluations conducted by the participants at the end of each term. The results of the summative questionnaires reflect that web-based rhetorical training in general and this course in particular is valued rather highly by the learners. For example, in the Winter term of 2007/08, all of the interviewed (100%) got along with the fact that the course mainly took place in a virtual learning environment. Equally, nearly everyone (92%) considered that the mainly text-based exercises were very convenient for transferring the general knowledge and rules to concrete situations and problems, whereby 68 per cent requested more oral exercises in public speaking. Nearly everyone (96%) felt well supported by the course instructor and the tutors, 80 per cent indicated that they profited from the comments of their fellow students, and 68 per cent stated that discussing the exercises of their co-learners was helpful to them. 96 per cent expressed the opinion that orational skills could be enhanced via the Internet, whereby the individualized feedback from the course instructors as well as the various possibilities for exercising were listed as the main advantages of this web-based public speaking course.

Other hybrid courses not only differ in the relation of face-to-face meetings and online-lessons, but also in terms of the required interaction between tutors and learners and the design of the learning material. The course "*Mündliche Kommunikation*" (Oral Communication), for example, offered to students of German philology and media and cultural studies at the Communications Department of Düsseldorf University, Germany [30], requires regular engagement in online-discussions on designated topics (e.g. How do communicative tricks and tactics influence credibility?). The learning material comprises video- and audio-files, a printed learning-booklet, PowerPoint-presentations, and worksheets. The video films, which are provided on the eLearning-platform, are recordings of

a face-to-face lecture given in an earlier semester. They have been edited to short, thematically assorted lecture-units. The audio-files offer, amongst other things, samples of speaking techniques. The learning booklet contains 46 assignments that structure the course and partly only can be solved with the knowledge acquired via the lecture videos. With the assignments of the learning booklet and the other learning material provided on the eLearning-platform, the students can acquire the essential knowledge autonomously. In accompanying group meetings, the assignments are discussed face-to-face with tutors and the other participants. In four additional face-to-face meetings, the participants gather in small groups and engage in practical activities (i.e. short speeches) which are video-recorded and then directly analyzed and appraised by the fellow-learners and the course instructor [9], [31].

#### 4. CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF WEB-BASED RHETORICAL TRAINING

As the preceding chapter has illustrated, there are various creative methods for teaching and training public speaking skills in virtual learning environments. The question, whether entirely online courses or hybrid courses are more effective for improving public speaking skills, can, of course, not be answered categorically, not least because research in this particular field is still in progress and reliable data is not yet available; in order to make progress in this field of study, I would strongly appreciate it if public speaking instructors and trainers that operate with both formats would share their experiences with the scientific community. Therefore, one can currently only deal with this question from a general point of view, from which hybrid learning arrangements, as several research studies have revealed [32], [33], seem to be more suitable than courses offered purely online.

Be it in purely online or in hybrid learning scenarios: As regards learning outcomes, the success of a web-based public speaking course not least depends on whether it meets the basic requirements of rhetorical education. As the considered examples of web-based rhetorical trainings have shown, modern ICT offer many possibilities to meet this challenge: As regards the *theoretical input*, the impartment of general knowledge and rules, a wide range of media – e.g. lecture videos, eBooks, slides, or other kinds of written material – can be provided on the course homepage. *Sample speeches* can be observed in different forms: as digital texts, as audio-files, or, even better, as video-files. For *individualized feedback* and *performance appraisal* various various synchronous and asynchronous communication tools – such as live chat, discussion forums, email, or even web conferencing – can be implemented.

The probably greatest challenge for web-based rhetorical trainings does indeed, as indicated by many critics, lie in the enhancement of learning experiences that resemble situations in which the acquired skill is to be applied. In hybrid courses, this challenge can, of course, be met easily – simply by integrating face-to-face meetings in which speeches are performed coram publico. Existing courses offered entirely online, however, often do not meet this challenge at all, thereby neglecting one of the most important components of a public speaking situation: the audience. With the rapid advances in communications technologies, especially those technologies which offer possibilities for audio-visual, synchronous interaction, i.e.

point-to-point or multi-point audio- or video-based web-conferencing programmes, other, possibly more effective solutions are arising. When these technologies are integrated in web-based public speaking courses as means for delivering speech assignments, speaker and audience are, of course, still not physically co-present, but the potential speaker can address a ‘real’ audience in real-time, hereby drawing very close to a ‘real’ face-to-face speech. This kind of delivery does, of course, involve a few restrictions – real eye contact, for example, can not be trained effectively –, and apart from careful planning it also requires the respective technical equipment. But as soon as the aforementioned communication tools belong to the standard equipment of PCs, this challenge can be met in a way that approximates ‘the real thing’.

Are web-based public speaking courses superior to traditional classroom-based courses? This question can not be answered categorically, either, since research in this field is in statu nascendi, and sufficient data is not available yet. Nevertheless, first research results provided by instructors that have experience with both formats, that is, with online (hybrid) and with face-to-face courses in public speaking, do, in fact, reveal that there are many areas in which web-based rhetorical trainings can be more effective than courses taking place in brick-and-mortar classrooms [5].

Take, for example, the theoretical input. In face-to-face classes, one can observe that many instructors prefer to present rules-of-thumbs and hand out rudimentary checklists rather than to explain the complex mechanisms of public speaking. But, as illustrated earlier, public speaking courses should dedicate a certain amount of time to theory in order to enable the students to transfer the general rules to various settings. In virtual learning environments, these complex rules and abstract concepts can be concretized and visualized, for example, in permanently available video sequences, thus becoming observable directly and also repeatedly, so that a deeper level of understanding can be encouraged.

Another area in which public speaking courses can be more effective than courses taking place in the brick-and-mortar classroom lies in the training of analytical skills. Instead of spending precious class time observing, reflecting on and discussing sample speeches, learners can observe exemplary speeches online and share their thoughts in online bulletin boards. By this, every single student – especially more reserved or slow learners – not only gets the chance to sharpen judgement and develop analytical skills in his or her own time, but also to participate in group discussions and present and defend his or her own opinion.

A perhaps more striking example can be found in the area of performance appraisal. As a matter of fact, profound and constructive feedback to individual performances takes up a considerable amount of time, especially when large groups are involved. Time and space are limited in brick-and-mortar classrooms. In virtual classrooms, however, the course instructors or tutors can not only support and interact with a larger group of students. When asynchronous communication tools are implemented in the virtual learning environment, the course instructors or tutors can also take their time to give every student the adequate amount of attention and appraisal needed to effectively develop, reflect on and improve his or her individual public speaking skills.

Thus, web-based rhetorical trainings are not only virtually possible, but when the basic requirements of rhetorical education are met *and* the full potential of modern ICT is explored, then online courses in public speaking can even

exceed courses offered in the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom.

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