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Pedagogy

WALTER ONG AND THE WILLARD PREACHER

BRINGING THE PUBLIC SPEAKING CLASSROOM TO ORALITY

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Vestiges of orality still exist and can be found if one looks carefully enough. This article describes my experiences of taking students in an introductory public speaking class to watch the "Willard Preacher," who is an unofficial fixture at our university. The Willard Preacher exhibits several of the characteristics of oral cultures described by Walter Ong. Observing the Willard Preacher provides students a concrete example of how oral style works in a natural setting and demonstrates some of the core differences between a speech that is written and one that has been crafted for oral delivery.

On the West Coast, campus preachers seem to be an anomaly. I had only been at Penn State for a few weeks when my students mentioned the Willard Preacher. "He tells everyone that they're drunken fornicators and that they're going to go to hell," one student said. I decided that, if nothing else, this sounded amusing, so I set out to find this person and listen to what he had to say. As I listened to him, it was not so much what he had to say, but *how he said it* that interested me. I had read Walter Ong's (1982) *Orality and Literacy* only a year earlier, but the ideas seemed so distant—stories of cultures long assimilated into the literate mindset. But here it was right in front of me—orality. That realization has

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drastically altered the way that I teach public speaking. This article describes that journey.

ORAL AND LITERATE STYLE

Gorgias (1972) explained, "Speech is a powerful lord" (p. 8). The somatic experience of hearing an entrancing speaker is difficult to ignore, but in many public speaking classrooms, *logos* reigns supreme. We teach students to write their speeches and sometimes even require full-sentence outlines. Is it any wonder that when they present such speeches, they seem wooden and devoid of enthusiasm? Students stumble over their words because they have internalized the experience of *writing* a speech—there is a correct way to say it and everything must appear in the proper order. However, this need not be the case. As Ong (1982) explained, "Oral narrative is not greatly concerned with exact sequential parallelism between the sequence in the narrative and the sequence in extranarrative referents. Such a parallelism becomes a major objective only when the mind interiorizes literacy" (p. 147). Moreover, students (and instructors) often forget that listening is a much different enterprise than reading. Goody (2000) pointed out that "with oral versions recited at different times and places, you cannot easily make a comparison, not the way you can when you lay the written versions . . . side by side and actually examine particular passages" (p. 38). As long as listeners can follow along, they tend to be forgiving of inconsistencies in the oration.

To help free students from the constraints that writing speeches places on them, I have them read an excerpt from *Orality and Literacy* so they will understand that there are significant differences in oral and written expression. Fortunately, there is little need to attempt to undo 18 years or more of the literate mindset—students already have some orality in their everyday lives; they are simply unaware of it, and in most academic endeavors, such expression is not rewarded. When students talk about their weekend activities, they are not speaking from the literate mindset. However, once they know that their speech is being graded, they feel the need to become more formal. This is not to say that public speaking should be informal. Rather, they should draw on elements of informal speech in order to make their speech sound more like speech and less like a read or memorized manuscript.

In the portion of Ong's book that I have students read (pp. 36–57), he lays out a framework of nine attributes of public discourse in oral cultures: it is additive rather than subordinative, aggregative rather than analytic, redundant or "copious," conservative or traditionalist, close to the human lifeworld, agonistically toned, empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced, homeostatic, situational rather than abstract. Other scholars propose taxonomies of varying degrees of difference and similarity (see Boas, 1925; Gagarin, 1999; Goody, 1977, 2000; Havelock, 1963, 1986), but I focus on Ong's framework because it is what I use in my classroom. In the following section, I discuss the four elements of oral expression that I feel are most useful to consider when

teaching public speaking: redundant or "copious," close to the human lifeworld, empathetic and participatory, and situational rather than abstract.

ENCOUNTERING THE WILLARD PREACHER

His real name is Gary Cattell, but everyone just calls him the Willard Preacher because he is always preaching at the steps of the Willard Building, one of the "free speech zones" that have become fashionable on university campuses lately. He does not look like a stereotypical preacher. He wears shorts and a T-shirt. He is thin, with an athletic build. He has glasses and dark hair. He appears to be in his late 40s. But the words that come from his mouth are pure hellfire and damnation:

> It's a going to hell Friday. Actually, a better way of looking at is a "compelled to sin Friday." It's Friday night and there'll be a moderate amount of fornicating taking place. On Friday night you all go out and get drunk and try to get laid. And you know you're going to get laid because if you can't get laid at Penn State, you're not getting laid ever because nowhere will you ever have so many willing partners in your age group. But you do it because it's OK. Everyone else is doing it.

Some of the students around me called back "yeah!" or similar responses of approval. I was surprised that students would express approval over being called drunken fornicators.

I listened for 90 minutes. During that time, I noticed his use of stylistic elements that revealed a kind of oral style. His speaking was circular and redundant, allowing students who were passing by to still understand his point. The audience interacted with him; when questioned, he would often direct the questions back to the one who asked. Most importantly, he had an air of confidence that comes from actually *knowing* his subject rather than simply knowing *about* it. He rarely opened his Bible, but cited it often. I knew that if I could get my students to have even half of his delivery skills, I would be a successful teacher. But what was more important, I now had a greater vision of what a public speaking class could be like. With a newfound focus on orality, I could help put the "speaking" back into the public speaking class and show students that speaking is not simply talking out loud. I wanted to teach students that their voice has power—not in an abstract, feel-good kind of way, but real power. My job was to help them to realize that power, and the framework of orality would play a part in that.

Many of my students had already experienced the Willard Preacher and were prepared for what he would say. The others were excited by what the knowledgeable students had to say, as well as the luxury of spending the day outside rather than in a classroom. I wanted the students to experience the Willard Preacher in his natural environment. To bring him into the classroom would have been to instill a kind of artificiality. In preparation for the observation of the Willard Preacher, I had students read the excerpt from *Orality and Literacy*.

On the day of observation, students arrived at the steps of the Willard Building, checked in with me, and sat wherever they wished. Generally, the Willard Preacher is already in the middle of a sermon, which evolves in a stream-of-consciousness style as different questions are asked or events take place. For example, during one observation, a student stood on the sidewalk behind the Willard Preacher and yelled "Praise the Lord!" The preacher turned around and said "Yes, we should." The student then said, "I thank God for giving me an enormous penis!" and walked off. Without missing a beat, the preacher remarked,

> There goes a guy with a small penis. See that's the problem—you guys don't even know how to use it. If you knew how to give a woman pleasure, there would probably be even more fornication going on on this campus. You give it your obligatory 2 minutes, roll over and go to sleep, and the woman is thinking, "I sinned for this?"

He then launched into a discussion of fornication amid cheers from the women in my class.

The preacher's sermons are not monologues. Students often ask questions to try to prove him wrong or just to argue. The preacher engages their questions and builds them into the discussion, often asking the student for evidence. In this way, students participate in and guide the content of the sermon. I do not require that my students ask questions, but they often do. They are familiar with the rituals of questioning and being questioned by the preacher, and quickly become a part of the performance. After we have listened to the preacher, we leave to discuss what we have seen. We discuss audience analysis, evidence, delivery, claims, and reasoning. Because the preacher is not a part of the conversation, the students are brutally honest. Students often have difficulty providing honest critiques of each other, but after observing the preacher they begin to break this taboo, recognizing the utility of honest feedback.

We then discuss elements that we observed in the preacher that we recognized from the Ong reading. Students generally recognize the idea of "conservative or traditionalist" and redundancy immediately. But on further reflection and discussion, students begin to recognize how the preacher has built up a sense of collective memory. They admitted that when they found out that we were going on a Friday, they knew that the sermon would be about "going to hell Friday" and knew what kind of message the preacher would have for them.

ORALITY AND THE PUBLIC SPEAKING CLASSROOM

In my public speaking class, I have only two rules: Students must be credible speakers on their chosen topic and there must be some exigency. I break this down by asking, "Why does this audience need to hear about this topic from you at this time?" A greater understanding of orality can help students more fully meet these requirements. For the remainder of this article, I discuss some of the ways that the Willard Preacher observation helped students connect principles of orality to principles of oral persuasion. Oral expression that is redundant, close to the human lifeworld, empathetic and participatory, and situational rather than

abstract has rhetorical qualities as well as mnemonic. How a speaker delivers a speech influences the construction of his or her ethos, helps to establish exigency, and demonstrates important differences in style between oral and written expression. My students found that the adoption of these oralistic strategies helped the Willard Preacher seem more credible and persuasive.

Ethos

E*thos* is a slippery concept. Aristotle explained that *ethos* is more than simply one's reputation. Rather, it is something that the speaker generates in the speech:

> Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. . . . This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. (Aristotle, "Rhetoric," 1356a4–11)

Moreover, *ethos* is transactional in nature; the audience must accept the speaker's definition of him or herself (see Benson, 1989). Research by Brennan and Williams (1995) suggests that listeners are attuned to verbal cues that reveal whether or not a person truly knows what he or she is talking about: "While speakers search memory and monitor their search, they also display their metacognitive states" (p. 396). They found that listeners are aware of this display:

> A listener's FOAK [feeling of another's knowing], based on a speaker's display of confidence in or commitment to an answer, was affected by the intonation of answers, the form of nonanswers, the latency to response, and the presence of fillers. . . . That listeners are sensitive to filled vs. unfilled pauses shows that paralinguistic displays can be used to estimate other people's knowledge. (pp. 396–397)

When students come to me to discuss their first speaking topic, they often express their credibility in such terms as "I am a student," or "I am female." I gently remind the student that half the class is female or that all of them are students and ask the student what makes him or her more credible then the rest of the class. If the student has no answer, I ask the student to choose another topic on which he or she is more knowledgeable. This is not to say that knowledge alone bestows credibility or *ethos*. Rather, if the speaker is not knowledgeable or lacks credibility, it is likely to affect the way his or her *ethos* is constructed.

As students discuss *ethos* in the context of the Willard Preacher, they can see how delivery is tied to the construction of *ethos*. He speaks causally, but with confidence. He doesn't stumble over his words. He can move with the nonverbal feedback he receives from the audience. The sermon is constantly evolving because he has a store of information from which to retrieve. He rarely opens his Bible, but quotes scripture from memory. Students state that they find him to be credible—even if they do not believe what he says—because of his confidence. Perhaps this is why Quintilian (1921) states,

> For my own part, I would not hesitate to assert that a mediocre speech supported by all the power of delivery will be more impressive than the best speech unaccompanied by such power . . . It was for this reason that Demosthenes, when asked what was the most important thing in oratory, gave the palm to delivery and assigned it second and third place as well, until his questioner ceased to trouble him. (XI. III. 5–6)

Delivery is more than simply getting up in front of an audience and not acting nervous. Rather, the way one speaks has implications for the construction of one's *ethos*. One way to help students succeed in this endeavor is to encourage them to speak about what they know. By doing so, they have less need to rely on their notes because they are able to draw on a store of knowledge that they already possess and weave the evidence and claims together into an argument that will help them appear confident. Moreover, the student will be able to adapt to audience feedback more fluidly. If the speaker recognizes the waning attention of the audience, he or she will be able to shift to the next thread of the argument rather than slavishly continuing on a path that has been constructed through writing.

Exigency

Bitzer (1968) explained that "a particular discourse comes into existence because of some specific condition or situation which invites utterance" (p. 4). This utterance, in order to be effective, must fit the occasion. Poulakos (1983) wrote, "The Sophists stressed that speech must show respect to the temporal dimension of the situation it addresses, that is, it must be timely" (p. 39). This ties in closely to the oralist notion that speech is "situational rather than abstract." In his discussion of "going to hell Friday," the Willard Preacher makes a timely argument. Students recognize that the sermon is relevant because of the timing. But there is more to the timing than simply the date. The preacher responds to questions concerning how he knows that they plan to go out and get drunk and fornicate by explaining that he was once a student like them, back in his "barbarian days," and that he used to go out and get drunk and try to get laid too. But there are also the occasional shouts of approval that come from the students when he makes the claim concerning their plans for the evening.

In our discussion, I ask students what they think of the preacher's claim that they are drunken fornicators. Although they may deny that they are drunken fornicators, they acknowledge that many people that they know fall into that category. It is readily accepted by my students that many students at our university have a tendency to drink a lot and that many of them do go out in an effort to procure sex. The preacher had tapped into the collective consciousness of the Penn State student body and recognized that this theme would resonate with them. This is a powerful rhetorical device because even if the students do not agree with the preacher's assessment of their situation, they tend to agree with his assessment that, by and large, many of their fellow students are drunken fornicators. In this case, students participate in the argument by supplying their own evidence, based either on themselves or on others that they know, to support the preacher's claim.

We discuss some of the ways that students can use similar strategies in their own speeches. One possibility that we find is drawing on each other's speeches. Bringing in arguments that other students have already made allows speakers to quickly make a point while drawing in students who recognize the material. A study by Garcia-Marques and Mackie (2001) demonstrates the power of using familiar material. Their findings suggest that "familiarity also influences the way in which persuasive information is processed, with familiar information not receiving the same intense scrutiny that unfamiliar messages may attract" (p. 29).

Drawing on the collective memory of the classroom also helps students establish an exigency for their topic. By understanding the concerns and values of the class members, students are able to tailor the speech to their audience. Plato (1961) rightly asserted that one must know the various kinds of souls in the audience (271d). More importantly, students begin to recognize that they can actually *do* something with their speech. As we prepare for their persuasive speeches, I ask each of them:

> What would you do if you had 30 people to help you? You do not get to pretend that you are giving a speech to any other group than what you have in front of you. This is not Congress or the United Nations. This is the classroom you've been sitting in all semester. What would you like to have us do?

By making the speaking situation explicitly situational, students are able to see how persuasion can be relevant for them.

Style

Perhaps the most difficult thing to teach students in a public speaking class is that they should not just write a speech; they should craft a speech that is meant to be delivered orally. Oral expression is intrinsically ephemeral. Once it leaves one's mouth, the moment is lost and that sentence can never be reclaimed. One way that oral cultures adapt for this is a system of constant backlooping. Although this is simple to do in speech, it seems unwieldy on paper. This was evident in the sermons of the Willard Preacher. He had a tendency to cycle through the same themes repeatedly, to the extent that students could predict where his sermon was heading. However, it was this redundancy, both in his career, as well as in individual sermons, that allowed students to recognize these themes and remember them.

Students resist redundancy. This suggests an impulse to cram as much evidence as possible into a speech, often in a list-like fashion (for more on lists and the literate mindset, see Goody, 1977). Ong (1982) notes that in oral cultures the solution is not to spew forth as much information as possible but to "think memorable thoughts" (p. 34). Creating a speech that is designed for oral delivery is awkward, but, as anyone who has transcribed a conversation can attest, spoken expression is much different from written expression. The key is to encourage students to embrace the elements of oral expression that will enhance their speech

while helping them to avoid the fillers and awkward pauses that detract from it. When students recognize that the Willard Preacher has incorporated elements of orality in his sermons without sounding forced or awkward, they begin to see that orality is not as foreign as it may first appear.

TOWARD AN ORALIST PEDAGOGY

The great irony of the public speaking class is that much of what we teach in the course seems to have little to do with speaking. We focus on logic, arguments, claims, warrants, and outlines, yet, forgetting the power of the spoken word, we often neglect giving issues such as style and delivery their due. This is not to say that other elements such as argument and evidence should be neglected. Aristotle noted that the rhetor has *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* at his or her disposal and should use them all. However, for all of these, delivery and style are key elements. If we as teachers encourage the use of oral style in speaking assignments, I believe that students will more fully understand how to draw on the power of the spoken word.

No discussion of pedagogical practice would be complete without a discussion of assessment or grades, and this may be another reason for distancing ourselves from delivery and style. Assessments of delivery and style are subjective, and in an age where grades below an A minus may be contested, we bristle at opening ourselves to possible criticism. But delivery is not completely subjective. Students, as well as instructors, recognize good delivery when they see it. One way I combat this is by videotaping all of my students' speeches. My students receive the grading criteria on the first day of class, so there is never a question concerning what is expected of them to receive a particular grade. After each speech day, each student watches his or her tape and then meets with me to discuss his or her performance. In general, students recognize their own delivery issues and can identify areas for improvement. As students are exposed to the theories and practices of oral expression, they begin to understand that how one expresses his or her thoughts and arguments has significant implications for how that thought is received and retained.

There is much to be gained by paying closer attention to orality in the public speaking classroom—or any classroom in which the subject requires competence in oral communication. Becoming a competent public speaker requires more than simply learning to construct good arguments; one must also draw on the power of the spoken word. Isocrates (1928) remarked,

> And yet I do not fail to realize what a great difference there is in persuasiveness between discourses which are spoken and those which are to be read . . . For when a discourse is robbed of the prestige of the speaker, the tones of his voice, the variations which are made in the delivery, and, besides, of the advantages of timeliness and keen interest in the subject matter; when it has not a single accessory to support its contentions and enforce its plea, but is deserted and stripped of all the aids which I have mentioned . . . it is natural, I think, that it should make an indifferent impression upon its hearers. (pp. 24–27)

The Willard Preacher is a unique fixture on my campus, but instructors can look for examples of orality around them. By introducing our students to orality, we provide them with some of the tools that they will need to influence others. Gorgias (1972) rightly states that speech itself is literally "comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies" (14). The spoken word can affect hearers emotionally, mentally, and physically (see Lunceford, 2007). By ignoring the orality of speech, we deny our students access to that power.

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