

Communication Education in America

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Because education in America was based on the British model, early colleges such as Harvard and Yale were largely oral — lectures, recitations, examinations given before the professors. Most students of higher learning were preparing to be preachers or teachers. Only males were welcome. Through time subjects grew, specialization followed. Departments of English included some rhetoric; oral communication teachers wanted their own discipline. Gradually organizations emerged such as the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. Departments of speech, of theater and about physiological speech problems began, both undergraduate and graduate. Women's interest and participation grew. Radio and television courses grew as did textbooks and courses in nonverbal communication, feminist rhetoric, medical communication, public speaking, argumentation, persuasion, interpersonal communication and intercultural communication. Speech communication is, in a very relevant way, a dynamic, responsive discipline, imminently useful.

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Speech education in America started very early in the colonies well before the declaration of independence.

When Harvard College was founded in New England (1636) it was based on the British system as exemplified by Oxford and Cambridge. That system was heavily forensic. Students were being prepared for careers in law and religion. They participated in syllogistic debates in Latin; they defended theses submitted by the faculty. As new institutions of learning were established such as William and Mary in Virginia, they tended to emulate Harvard.

In the beginning, and for many years to come, there were no

women students in residence to be educated in the forensic instruction at Harvard or at Yale or at other colleges. Women had no opportunity to gain a communication education at schools, colleges, and universities because such education was restricted to men. Not until many years later, when the country was faced with the great crisis of a civil war, were women able to overcome the taboos and begin to speak in public on such topics as the emancipation of slaves and the rights of women, particularly their right to vote. Even then women generally had to learn their forensic skills by practicing them before an audience as there were few opportunities for them to get academic help.

As time went by the syllogistic disputations (debating) in Latin began to wane. The faculty continued to include professors of rhetoric and the students were still required to defend theses, make declamations, and deliver orations. Colleges also began to include the study of elocution, which was then popular in France and England, in the curriculum. For example, one professor of elocution at Harvard had constructed a large round hollow ball, made of thin slats of wood, large enough to hold a student, so students could stand in the sphere and practice the proper positions for the arms and body when expressing different emotions. The practice involved placing their arms through the appropriate slits while delivering a speech.

In the years following the formation of the American constitution and the founding of the new country (1789), rhetoric and communication along with elocution continued to be a part of the curriculum. The United States was developing a culture that was saturated with public speaking, rhetoric, and debates. Travel writers from Britain who visited the United States and wrote about their findings often noted how widespread and important speech making was in the new country. One noted that Americans had no drama, no music, no painting and no writers. The one art they did have

was oratory. Even in a favorable cultural context women were unable to study communication in an educational context. Special schools for women offered courses thought to be more appropriate to young ladies.

During the period from the founding of the country into the eighteenth century students were expected to learn rhetorical principles and they continued to present speeches. Typically, at the time of graduation the institution would sponsor forensic exercises. Family members would assemble and the graduates would demonstrate to their family and friends that they were now, indeed, educated by delivering speeches.

In this period the American culture was clearly one that valued communication but as the nineteenth century continued, there were fewer classes in communication and fewer exercises of communication practice in class. What took the place of the classroom debate or speech was the rise of the literary societies. Most colleges and universities had several literary societies. The freshmen would become members of a society and practice communication in that setting. The societies engaged in debating, put on plays such as those of Shakespeare, and practiced oratory.

As time went on the societies in several schools experimented with intersociety debates. By the early 1880s intercollegiate debating had begun. The debate competitions caught the interest of the participants and intercollegiate debating began to spread across the country. Soon the debates became important for school spirit and pride. As late as the early twentieth century the debate team from the University of Minnesota “gophers” visited the University of Wisconsin to debate the “badger” team. The Minnesota team won the debating contest and when they returned to Minneapolis they were met at the railroad station by a large group of students and the pep band in a celebration larger than the ones the football team was accustomed to. Intercollegiate forensic competitions, while based

on debate, soon included other speech events such as original orations, extemporaneous speaking, and oral interpretation of literature.

As the intercollegiate debating became more and more competitive, it also became more professional. Schools began to hire professional debate coaches. These were often communication faculty members who were star debaters as students and who decided to be communication teachers because of their commitment to debate. Forensic activity was considered an extracurricular activity on the model of athletics but courses in public speaking and debate were being offered as part of the communication curriculum.

In the years since forensics and rhetoric were central to the curriculum at Harvard the course work in oral communication had been absorbed by the rise of departments of English. Indeed, in more recent times the Harvard Boylston Chair of Rhetoric was, at one point, held by a poet. With the increasing emphasis on writing and literature the communication faculty found themselves teachers of public speaking or elocution. Since elocution was losing its reputation as a solid academic subject the teachers of public speaking also began to feel the loss of prestige in the departments of English where teachers of composition and literature tended to have more recognition in the department and the academic community.

The unrest resulted in some teachers of speech coming to believe that, while they had a section devoted to public speaking in the National Council of Teachers of English, the only way to give public speaking its due in the academic community would be to establish separate departments of communication. The first organization of teachers of public speaking was the Eastern Public Speaking Conference founded in 1910. In 1914 the public speaking section of the National Council of Teachers of English voted to organize their own separate organization. As the name of their new organization they selected the *National Association of Academic*

Teachers of Public Speaking. They thus made clear their belief that oral communication deserved a place in the academic community. Subsequently the name was changed to the *Speech Association*, and later to the *Speech Communication Association*, and, currently, to the *National Communication Association*. Each of the name changes represented substantial developments in the teaching of communication in America. The original title stressed the importance of public speaking and, by implication, of debate and rhetoric. It also reflected the fact that they wanted to be known as academically respectable. Indeed they began to separate themselves from the elocutionists. The traditions of the English experience and the elocutionists did result in the teaching of what came to be called The Oral Interpretation of Literature. This grew to include not only the reading of poetry and novels aloud but also plays which resulted in some of the features of the elocution movement continuing in such classes as voice and articulation improvement. These additions to public speaking also brought changes to the research emphasis that the members of the new association felt was an important way to gain prestige in the academic culture. Research in voice and articulation improvement led to practical applications not only in voice training but also in training people to be speech therapists. These speech correctionists treated such speech problems as stuttering, lispings, and hearing difficulties. This department at the University of Minnesota is currently called *Communication Disorders*.

Another area of interest that grew into greater importance at this time was that of the theater arts. More and more of the new departments of speech began to have sections devoted to the study of drama which was something that was common in the English departments. These sections began producing plays which they presented not only to the students but also to the general public. The new association soon had a theater wing, and a voice science speech

and hearing wing to supplement the academic teachers of public speaking and the debaters and rhetoricians.

With the coming of radio the history of speech education relating to oral interpretation, voice and articulation improvement, performance relating to reading, acting, and public speaking encouraged some members of the communication faculty to begin teaching classes in radio announcing, acting, and speaking. The result was that in the period of the late 1930s there was a substantial amount of education for the new media. When television came on the scene in the late 1940s a number of the professors of radio studies and instruction began to develop courses in television studies. Teachers of courses in how to communicate on the radio had a relatively easy time of it in terms of electronic equipment and other teaching aids. The development of tape recorders provided a real aid to having students write and read programs, commercials, and talk shows in courses in radio speaking. Some institutions had other faculty members in areas such as engineering who were interested in radio and working on making radio receivers and transmitters. In the early years of radio the colleges and universities found it relatively simple to get permission from the government to put a transmitter on the air, thus giving the engineers a chance to work out their research in a realistic manner. Engineers, however, were seldom interested or very good at managing and programming a radio station. If the institution had a communication department with instructors in radio, public speaking, and theater, they often ended up programming some or all of the time and giving their students in advanced classes an opportunity for on-the-air experience.

Television posed many more problems than did radio for the instructors who wished to create courses in television performance and production. Still, a number of such courses were developed and in a few institutions the pattern of engineering faculty helping

to build broadcasting facilities was repeated. However, by the time that a handful of such courses were in place the federal government stopped issuing licenses for new stations and the result was students often flocked to the schools that had a television station or to places where the faculty in communication could get to an established television station and receive brief periods of time for their programs or get such time by having the school pay for it.

Television required expensive, heavy, and elaborate cameras, control rooms, and large spaces even to simulate a real studio. Money for equipment was a difficulty for many schools and space was always hard to come by. Yet television was exciting and offered the possibility of many challenging and lucrative opportunities for students of communication. So the era of radio became studies of radio and television. Many instructors of television studies managed to teach their classes by using less expensive simulated teaching aids such as wooden cameras, and mock control rooms and microphones.

The interest in television communication was stimulated by a country-wide excitement, similar to the current interest in the internet and the world wide web, about the possibilities of teaching by television and thus making classroom teaching obsolete. Educational television never lived up to its promise but radio and television courses in speech education remain an important area. And currently there is some indication that communication studies may begin teaching and doing research about communication on the internet.

The taboos against women speaking in public were often based on religious concerns or on some assumptions about what was appropriate for the female role in society. The rather large changes of the twentieth century in the curriculum of communication courses bypassed most of the older taboos. Women could now take courses in oral reading, speech correction, acting, and some even became

debaters. Some women taught communication in high schools but still fewer women than men became professors of communication in institutions of higher learning. It was still difficult for women with training in radio to get on the air jobs because of some notion that women's voices would not be as effective on the air.

In the 1930s some communication teachers began to get interested in the study of business communication. The result was the development of courses and even some textbooks in group communication. By the 1940s the study of, teaching, and research into the nature of small group communication increased. A few years later the courses in group communication proliferated and it became a standard part of the curriculum of many communication departments.

At this point other disciplines such as psychology, education, and business also were involved in group work and the study and the teaching of small group communication was given a boost by the fears of communication scholars that an important part of their interests would be lost to other disciplines.

Related to small group communication was a growing interest in the nature of communication within the organizational structures. The conventional wisdom was that communication skills were important for organizational leadership, management and effectiveness. There were also beginnings of interest in and study of business communication. By the 1940s this interest increased rapidly and organizational communication became a part of the standard curriculum.

Methods of Communication Instruction in America

The expansion of the topics included in the teaching of communication resulted in some changes in the methods of instruction and the strengthening and continuation of others.

From the first communication courses to the present day a major

topic for instruction has been learning to give public speeches. The techniques of instruction in public speaking remained essentially the same. The earliest courses included some how-to-do-it readings and lectures. This, how-to-do-it indoctrination, was then applied by the students developing and delivering speeches before an audience. The instructors evaluated the efforts. They sometimes used drills or exercises to improve on perceived problems. In Harvard the student whose speaking was hard to hear, or whose gestures were stiff or distracting might be given special help with voice usage and a time in the large ball to work on gestures. Today's students in public speaking will usually be asked to read chapters in a textbook. The instructor will give a series of lectures further explaining the text material or adding additional information. Students take tests on the material in the book and the lectures to demonstrate how well they understand the material. They will also be assigned a number of speaking situations with the rest of the class serving as the audience. These speeches are then critiqued by the instructor who gives them a grade which becomes part of the student's final grade for the class. The coaching of debaters tends to be more intense and extended but instruction in debating through the years has emulated that of public speaking. There is an emphasis in both on content and delivery.

With the addition of courses in oral interpretation of literature and in theater the methods of instruction continued to use the study traditions and how-to-do-it techniques of public speaking and debate but, now drawing on the long tradition of professional readers, story tellers, actors, directors, set designers, and playwrights, instruction included theories of the drama and advice on how to perform, direct, and write plays. Instruction in radio and television has been similar to that of the theater in terms of preparation for performance and careers.

The methods of instruction in small group and organizational

communication have also included the formula of textbooks and lectures and experiential learning. For small groups experiential exercises often consisted of being placed in a small group and then being given projects to work on as a group. Usually such simulations included a debriefing in which the instructor and the members of the group analyzed what had happened during the exercise and how the experience related to the theoretical material studied in text books or from the instructors' lectures. On occasion the projects would require the student to make a case study of some ongoing group in the college or university or in the community. The students would then write an analysis of the group's procedures, leadership, effectiveness, and communication.

Radio and television courses often gave such assignments as write a commercial about something likely to be aired on radio and then read your commercial either directly to the radio audience as represented by other members of the class or into a tape recorder for easier analysis and discussion. The same assignment for television was simplified with the development of television camcorders that were inexpensive and easy to use. Prior to that time regular studio cameras could be used by institutions that had the money to create realistic studios.

The methods of instruction outlined above were typical of undergraduate instruction. Graduate school methods were often quite similar with the addition of considerably more reading in the history of rhetoric and in theories of rhetoric. Generally students in graduate schools were taught in seminars where students investigated communication topics and wrote papers that they then presented to the other members of the seminar for comment, questions and critiques. In graduate school, too, the students often had a faculty adviser who functioned a bit like early tutors when the British system was being emulated.

Fads and Fancies in Speech Education in America

Over the years that encompass the teaching of communication in America, students and faculty have been intrigued by, and caught up in, fads and fancies that spread through other disciplines and the popular culture. The result has been some detours which caused excitement and often a change in the content and method of teaching.

One of the first big fads was the development of the elocutionist movement in Europe that was adapted by a number of instructors. The movement made a widespread impact on instruction and also had an impact on the fundamental understanding and rationale for improving communication. It lasted for a long time and is often viewed as more than a fad or fancy despite its essential demise in the nineteen forties.

In the same decades when elocution was fading there was a brief but substantial movement that began at the University of Minnesota and spread through other portions of the discipline. Again this movement was an example of the tendency to try to integrate contemporary intellectual fads into teaching and research. The post World War I period was a time of prohibition of alcohol, speakeasies, women's suffrage, and finally the Great Depression. It was also a time of intellectual ferment, of changes in morality, the graphic arts, theater, music, and design. For teachers of speech some of the most important and intriguing events in popular culture were those in psychology, particularly the works of Sigmund Freud and his disciples. Perhaps of equal importance was the move to restructure education by the education theorist John Dewey. Another notion that became important was that of Mental Hygiene. It was the guiding word for the fantasy theme that with proper management people could ensure their mental health just as patients who are physically ill can, with proper treatment, get well and ensure themselves of a healthy future. An early popularizer of Mental

Health training in communication classes was Bryng Bryngelson of the University of Minnesota. Indeed, Minnesota was something of a hotbed for the movement. Another Minnesotan who wrote in strong support of using Mental Hygiene was Wayne Morse. He entitled his paper "The Mental Hygiene Approach in a Beginning Speech Course." The basic rhetorical vision of the movement was expressed in Bryngelson's argument that most bad speaking stemmed from bad mental health. The corollary to that was that the beginning speech course provides, as its primary educational value, for the student's development of behavioral habits that solve the problems of mental hygiene and make them better speakers. This was essentially the talking therapy of psychologists and therapists. The Mental Hygiene approach to speech instruction received considerable attention for several years but by 1954 it had essentially run its course.

Prior to the 1940s the bulk of the research by scholars in communication was devoted to studies of rhetorical history and theory. Many doctoral dissertations were written making a rhetorical criticism of the times, the speakers and the speeches of important orators. Presidents such as Abraham Lincoln were studied as well as congressional speakers such as Daniel Webster and Robert Hayne. Leading lecturers such as Robert Ingersol and William Jennings Bryan were also the subjects for these critical studies. In this period there were a few scholars who were beginning to emulate the research methods of the psychologists. These techniques were borrowed from other disciplines such as the natural sciences, where scientists used investigations that set up hypotheses to test, and used the manipulation of subjects to test the hypotheses.

At the end of the Second World War a number of returning veterans who were speech scholars and teachers or who had learned the techniques of variable analytic studies during their military experience returned to teaching with the knowledge of how to

investigate communication hypotheses. One such scholar was David K. Berlo. He became the leader of a number of like minded communication scholars who started proselytizing others to switch from the critical study of speeches and speakers to the social scientific study of communication processes.

The results of the social scientific revolution were immediate and ongoing. The change from the humanistic culture of English and the new departments of speech in the postwar period to the growing challenge of a social scientific culture caused an uproar of debate and conflict among communication teachers. The response of the established rhetoricians to this new world view was mixed. Some of the rhetoric scholars looked upon the suggested changes as useful and immediately moved to find a scientific scholar to join the faculty. But there was a dearth of such young scholars which encouraged some graduate schools, like the one at Michigan State University, to set up a graduate program that emphasized scientific studies of communication. Michigan State hired Berlo to establish the program and it became a flagship of the new developments.

The converts to social psychological research and teaching began to agitate for a new name for the discipline. They argued that *speech* was a confusing label; the general public had no idea what a course in *speech* might be and the ambiguity and strangeness of the name kept the discipline from taking the place in academia that it deserved. They preferred the name *communication*. Many humanists and rhetoricians resisted the change of title. They argued that in the army the communication soldiers were essentially stringing telephone lines and creating other channels for sending messages. In addition the faculty of the English department had already laid claim to *communication*. Those who were advocating a change argued that most scholars from outside disciplines were confused by the name *speech*. Officials of granting agencies in the government and in the foundations also did not know how to

respond to applications for support for research submitted by scholars from a discipline called *speech*. The issue came down to one faction trying to change the name of the discipline to *communication* and the other holding on to *speech*. The actual changing of the name of the discipline reveals the change of the nature of the research and teaching of communication in America in the latter years of the 20th century and continuing into 2000.

The first name of the discipline was *Academic Teachers of Public Speaking*. This name lasted only a short time as the members of the new discipline diversified the scope of the teaching and research to include speech correction and audiology, theater, oral interpretation of literature, radio speaking, etc. The members of the discipline finally decided that one thing that the various branches of their study had in common was that all were involved in human speech in some form or another. They selected the new name *speech*. *Speech* lasted through a period of disintegration. The first group to leave and set up their own association was the speech correction, voice science, and audiology group. This was followed some years later by the theater group.

The pressure from the faction wanting to change the name to communication won something of a victory when the national association changed its name to the *Speech Communication Association*. As the change to the new millennium approached the change was finally made to the current *National Communication Association*.

The American people in the 1950s were, as usual, a diverse and pluralistic lot, but public opinion was generally positive in its evaluation of science and the scientific method. Medical advances and the race to put people on the moon encouraged the generally good opinion many Americans had about science.

The 1960's, however, saw a reaction against science, not throughout the entire society, but on the part of substantial groups of people. The participation of America in the Vietnamese war was

divisive, only strengthening the resentment against the contributions of science to the developing of the atomic bomb and atomic weapons of war. Young people, particularly, became disenchanted with what they called the "Establishment." They took to the streets with banners proclaiming, "Make Love Not War." For them, anything hinting at the idea of control of one human, using or exploiting another human being, was anathema. The rise of humanistic psychology, the human potential movement, and interpersonal communication all came together to form a new style of communication.

Compared to the typical communication styles undergirding the academic studies and teaching of communication, the changes gathering in sections of the popular culture were quite different. The speech teachers were teaching the way to use communication to persuade in order to achieve some end or achieve other objectives. These traditional styles of communication came in conflict with those who saw the control of one person over others by the use of communication as dangerous and evil. The rebels were developing a new relationship style of communication that stressed communication for personal growth or for the reward of making contact with another authentic human being. As one convert to the new approach put it, "nothing is more important to me than to have an honest and authentic communication with a significant other; for that I will stay up all night."

Faculty members who were part of the new movement began to change the way they taught their courses in communication, which they referred to as relationship communication. In their courses they often used the devices of popular culture such as trust exercises in which, for example, students would fall backwards trusting their partners to catch them before they fell to the floor. Encounter group techniques were group discussions in which the members were taught to be honest and authentic when they expressed how

they felt during the discussion. They were coached to stress their feelings. “What you just said made me angry,” was approved of by the group leader whereas the member who felt angry but responded, “No, no, I’m fine with that,” would be chastised and urged to be authentic and tell the group how he or she really felt. One of the most important agendas of the new movement was to attack the basic course in public speaking. They charged that public speaking courses were designed to teach students to play games in order to gain an advantage, and by doing so they destroyed the authenticity of the communication because the goals were to gain control and power over the listeners. When they could the instructors abolished public speaking as the first class in communication and replaced it with the interpersonal course. Under the pressures of the attack on public speaking among communication teachers and others in the general public the course became unpopular. How unpopular is indicated by the response of the Dale Carnegie Company. Carnegie had written a popular book entitled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. The public success of the book led to the development of a leading non-academic company presenting the general public with courses in public speaking. The impact on this company by the attacks on public speaking is indicated by the way they changed their advertising and by their instructors wearing a label that read *STAMP OUT PUBLIC SPEAKING*. This might have been a tongue in cheek joke of an advertising man but it does indicate the extent of the success of those attacking public speaking.

These new ideas were associated with a movement that was also against the war in Vietnam, for stopping the pollution of the earth, and joining communes rather than market oriented corporations. The ideas crossed the boundaries of the humanist vision of the rhetoricians and the social scientists. Teachers of communication from both camps embraced the new emphasis on interpersonal

communication. Many had to be retooled and they turned to the popular culture associated with the movement for the new ideas.

Within the active teachers of communication studies the backlash was not long in coming, and, again, the anti's came from both the humanists and social scientists. The opposition charged the teachers in the new movement with using "touchy-feeley" teaching methods which were inappropriate in a classroom. They argued that the new teaching ideas were shallow and betrayed the discipline by ignoring the wisdom of the past and losing the worthwhile core of communication studies while succumbing to the fads of the moment.

The new climate in communication spawned a number of innovations. They endorsed the idea of the importance of nonverbal communication and instituted courses in that subject. Several textbooks were authored and it became a popular addition to the study of communication. By the 1970s the excitement and enthusiasm of the movement people began to wane. Public speaking regained its popularity as the first class in the curriculum and interpersonal communication was accepted as an important class in many curriculums. But, as the popular culture began to turn its back on the movement there were fewer and fewer so called "touchy feeley" courses and encounter groups used in communication classrooms. As time went by the humanists and social scientists came to an accommodation and worked together for the most part. One of the legacies of the turmoil of the 1960s was a proliferation of new areas of communication studies. In addition to nonverbal communication we have had research courses and textbooks in Family Communication, Medical Communication, Ethical Communication, Geriatric Communication and Public Relations. Another legacy was the women's movement and the fact that women were now seen as both students and teachers of communication in all of its varied forms.

Over the years the *American Communication Association* has been joined by other associations devoted to communication. The first to be formed has changed its name several times and is currently called the *International Communication Association*. Perhaps the most important and successful of the new areas of study has been that of Intercultural Communication. The final broad based association is called the *World Communication Association*.

There are numerous other smaller associations on the state level in the United States for areas of study and teaching. If the first study of communication was a sturdy British forensic tree planted in American soil by Puritans, that tree has survived periods of neglect but has grown over the years until now it is a giant tree with branches spreading in all directions, known and admired around the world.

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