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2. The Importance of Public Speaking

ARON BEDERSON, PH.D.

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

- Understand the specific components of the public speaking process and begin to apply the skills involved.
- Apply some strategies to cope with the normal nerves that may arise when speaking in public.
- Understand the differences between communicating with an audience in person and communicating online.

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public speaking is not people's greatest fear as it is often reported, it does affect at least 25% of the population. The clinical term for the fear of speaking in public is *glossophobia* (Tsausides 1). This chapter will give you information on the importance of public speaking as it relates to you and explain some of the important components of the communication process.

Although it is feared, public speaking is also one of the most respected activities an individual can engage in and master. Since ancient times, in cultures throughout the world, students have studied and practiced the art of [oration](#). Every culture has their own sets of traditions. "Before the advent of the written word, historical events were transmitted to future generations through the use of compelling stories. A significant approach of human capacity was the ability to preserve its historical heritage using narratives. Every civilization has a historical and cultural heritage which people hold dear" (Nduka 91). Throughout the world, those who had the ability to speak effectively and command the attention of groups of listeners rose to become prominent leaders in all walks of life, from political rule to the arts.

From the time humankind began to congregate in groups and listen to one person tell a story or address their social/communal needs, speakers have grappled with the anxiety that speaking in groups can create. The goal of this text is to help you understand the process of communication on a one-to-one basis as well as in a larger context and give you tools to manage the anxiety that may arise in this process. As you study and practice the process of public speaking, you will begin to gain the sense that YOU are in charge of your experience.

You may feel that you are new to the discipline of public speaking, but you have already been practicing this skill for many years. Every time you engage with a friend, stranger or business associate you are developing this skill. Learning to articulate your thoughts and feelings is important in your personal relationships as well. You will have to employ your listening skills with a partner as well as be able to interpret their reactions to you. While there are differences between speaking with someone one-to-one or delivering a prepared speech to a specific audience, you have employed many basic skills that are a part of any communication process.

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views on important issues publicly as well as debate them with others. President Biden has worked with a stuttering issue since childhood; he has become a strong public speaker and participated successfully in debates with challenging opponents. Other well known actors and politicians who overcame stuttering and became prominent in their fields include Winston Churchill, James Earl Jones, Tiger Woods, Marilyn Monroe and Samuel L. Jackson. The art of oration is still a highly valued skill. In general, successful political candidates and community leaders have mastered it and use this skill in their work and campaigns.

You will also see that communication skills are vital to your success in the workplace. You will need to be able to articulate your interest and qualifications for a job interview. You will have to make presentations on the job and communicate effectively with your colleagues. Your ability to master these skills will determine your level of success.

As communication has become increasingly digital, some may think that the need to refine one's speaking skills are no longer necessary. As you may have already observed, this is not the case. Unfortunately, online communication does not always employ and develop our communication skills. As you reflect on your experience during the pandemic and your experience in the Zoom classroom and other online activities, you may have noticed that some students used technology to enhance their connection to others while some used it to distance themselves. If you have tried presenting in a Zoom room without seeing the faces of your classmates, you may have noticed that you are not able to "read" the reactions of your audience to the delivery and content of your speech. By "reading" the reactions of the audience, I am referring to observing their body language and facial expressions. While we cannot know what the audience is thinking, we can get a sense of their response to your presentation by their physical reactions to it. Keep in mind, however, that their reactions are not always about you. They may be thinking of other things while listening to you speak. Perhaps you are just observing their general attitudes and expressions. If you have ever been in the position of listening to someone speak without seeing their facial expressions and body language, you will know that it is difficult. When using communication technologies such as Zoom, you still employ some important skills used in the communication process: organizing ideas into a co-

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However, you are not developing all of the tools used when presenting live and in person.

Whether in a prepared or impromptu speech you can continue to develop your public speaking/communication skills both online or in person, and in all communication contexts. You are using your voice, body, and presentation skills to reach your audience when making a presentation in public you just need to use these tools in a different manner. This text will give you the skills to use your body to support the process of public speaking and communication as well as strategies to organize your ideas into an effective speech.

Tips for Handling Anxiety/Excitement

First, it is important to address one of the blocks to your success in getting up and speaking in front of others. As I have mentioned, public speaking is regarded as one of the primary fears people have. There are tools you can use to handle the nervousness you may experience when communicating in public.

Breathe

To begin, remember to breathe! Sit or stand up straight and take a deep supported breath from the diaphragm, a thin skeletal muscle that separates the abdomen from the chest. It contracts and flattens when you inhale, creating a vacuum effect that pulls air into the lungs. When you exhale, the diaphragm relaxes, and the air is pushed out of the lungs (Santos-Longhurst).

As you inhale and exhale, whether you are sitting or standing, keep a tall straight spine. Release any tension or anxiety with each exhalation, and breathe in fresh energy as you inhale. Breathing from the diaphragm will feel different if you are used to taking regular chest breathes. One way to start breathing this way is to put your hands on your belly and blow the air in your lungs OUT! Your belly should contract as you push the air out. Then release the belly and diaphragm

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ety with each exhalation, and breath in fresh energy as you inhale. Gently drop your head forward, then back and side to side. Release any tension in your neck and let your head “sit” on top of your spine. You should now be lined up well!

Warm Up Your Face, Mouth, and Tongue

The next exercise is helpful in warming up the muscles of the face, mouth, and tongue. Place your hands on your cheeks and the side of your nose. Gently make the sound HMMM and feel your lips and nose vibrate. Your cheeks and nose are natural resonators when you speak and sing; together, they can be called, “the mask.” Another sound to make to wake up your natural resonators in the “NG” sound. Raise your tongue to the roof of your mouth and make feel the NG sound in your nose and throat.

Use the Energy in Your System

Try to change the way you think about the “fight or flight” reaction, which your body may move into when you approach a public speaking situation. Think about the energy moving through your body not as fear but as excitement. Actually, the “fight or flight” response helps prime your body to handle any potential danger you may face in an actual life or death situation. While public speaking may feel like a life or death situation, it is not. You can also think of the excitement you may experience when you are making public presentations as being in a “highly adrenalized” state. Use the energy coursing through your system to fuel your presentation. YOU are in charge.

Think Positively

There are other tools you can use to manage your energy before a presentation. Think positively about the outcome. See yourself delivering your presentation.

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Sometimes, just taking a moment to relax and focus on your breathing can be enough to calm and center you before a presentation.

[This video shows Qui Gong instructor Nadiya Nottingham demonstrating hand mudras](#) designed to dispel fear and suffering. The more you make presentations, the better you will get at mastering your pre-performance anxiety as well as your performance nerves.

Be Prepared

Also, taking the time to be prepared before a presentation will do a great deal to bring down your anxiety level. When you see politicians deliver speeches or listen to keynote speakers address their audience, you are hearing the words of a well-organized and carefully crafted speech. Some of these speakers even have the assistance of other writers helping them write and organize their speeches. You are not in this position. While it is a good idea to practice your speech in front of family and friends and get feedback from them on the structure and organization of the speech, it is up to you to write a speech that will impact others as you intend. Working from a well-organized outline that carefully lays out your speech will help ensure the effectiveness of your presentation and diminish any fear you may have in making it. The more you tailor your speech to fit the occasion and audience you are addressing, the more relaxed and confident you will feel.

Get Experience

To recap, getting experience speaking in public will help you master your nerves. Practice builds confidence. As you apply the tools you have learned, they will become second nature to you. All of the tools I have mentioned call on you to strengthen certain “muscles”. This is one of the reasons working on your public speaking skills is so important. You will use these new muscles in many aspects

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suasive or a group debate—you will develop your organizational and critical thinking skills as you do your research and boil down your ideas into a cohesive presentation.

Listen

Listening is another extremely important component of the communication process. Even when making a presentation, you need to “listen” to the feedback you are getting from your audience. Also, there may be a question/answer component to your presentation. You will need to listen carefully to any audience member in order to address whatever issue they raise.

Listening in a high-pressure situation requires focus and concentration which you will strengthen as you gain experience (Lucas 19). You do not listen only with your ears. You need to observe and “read” the body language of your audience. What are they communicating to you as you make your presentation? You may need to adjust your presentation depending on the feedback you are getting from your audience.

Communication is a dynamic process. As Dr. Vincent Tzu-Wen Cheng, another contributing writer to this textbook, points out, “Messages are being given and received through the five sensory channels (i.e. visual, audio, tactile, olfactory and gustatory channels. In general, the greater the number of channels used, the more in depth and accurate communication will be” (Cheng). There is also an [entire chapter on listening](#) in this OER textbook written by Professor Janet Douglas-Pryce that goes into more depth about the complexities of the listening process.

The Communication Process

Speaking in public will demand that you master all of the components of the communication process. This is one of the reasons public speaking is so impor-

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ory. One of the first examples was written by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver for Bell Telephone in 1948 with the goal of increasing the efficiency of telephone communication (Novack). It mentions the seven main components of the communication process.

1. There is the *speaker* or the person sending the message to their listeners. When you give a speech, you are the speaker. You gain the attention of your audience based on your credibility and the interest you have in your subject.
2. The process of conveying information starts with the speaker/communicator *encoding* their ideas into symbols; letters and words. The listener decodes these messages and make meaning out of these symbols.
3. It is very important that the *message* that the speaker sends is the one that the listener receives. If you have ever played the game of telephone in which one person whispers a message into their neighbor's ear and the message is passed along to the last person in the circle, you have seen how the final message can be completely altered from the way it started. Remember, you use your entire body to communicate. Every hand gesture, tilt of the head or your posture as you sit or stand says something as you send or receive messages. Also, the words of your speech may say one thing, but if the feeling you are presenting behind the words doesn't support them, you are sending a mixed message to your audience and they will interpret it in a variety of ways.
4. Another factor that will impact the message that your audience receives is the *channel* through which you communicate. You may have noticed that communicating in a Zoom room or other online platform is very different than communicating in the classroom. As I mentioned earlier, communicating in a Zoom room with the camera on has a different impact on your audience than communicating with the camera off. The channel is the medium through which you communicate: in person, on the phone, with a microphone, through Zoom, or on TV. All of these means of communicating will have an impact on the way you speak. You will need to modify the way you communicate to accommodate whatever channel you are using. Speaking to a large group with a microphone is very different than talking to a group in the classroom. Presenting a speech on television without a studio audi-

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sible. There may be reviews or ratings to gauge how your presentation went on television.

5. As I mentioned earlier, *listening* is a vital part of the communication process. If there wasn't anyone receiving your message, your speech would have no life. Think of the question "if a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, is there a sound?" The listener needs to be a part of the communication cycle to receive the sound. Keep in mind that the listener will filter the message of the speaker through their own experience. This is a factor that the speaker needs to keep in mind and prepare their speech to suit the background of their audience.
6. Another factor that impacts the communication process is *interference* of the message as it is being communicated. Interference can take a variety of forms. It could be from an external source such as noise outside of the room you are speaking in or internal- when the listeners may be distracted by personal thoughts or physical discomfort.
7. *Feedback* is the last step of the Shannon-Weaver model of communication. After the message of the sender is encoded, sent through the communication channel and finally decoded by the receiver, it is processed by them and they respond by giving feedback to the speaker which impacts further communication. Feedback can take various forms. It can be verbal and take the form of questions, sometimes heckling, or even cheers. Very often, however, it is nonverbal and is conveyed through the listener's body language. How are they engaging with the speaker physically? Are they leaning in to listen or turning away? All of this is information the speaker receives and impacts the way they deliver their message.

Finally, there is the context or *situation* in which the communication takes place. Where is the communication event happening? Is it in a classroom or a courtroom? Outside or inside? Are you speaking at a graduation ceremony or a wedding? Are you trying to have an intimate conversation in a noisy restaurant? The situation where you are speaking will have an impact on the communication.

The communication model as described by Shannon and Weaver was later developed by David Berlo in 1960. Berlo looked at how the specifics of each aspect of the communication model impacts the way the message is received. Berlo incorporates the attitudes, knowledge, communication skills, and culture of both the sender and the receiver of the message into his analysis and discusses how this impacts the way the message is interpreted. Berlo's study takes into account how the background of the receiver and sender as well as all of the variables associated with each affect the communication that takes place and how they are interpreted (Novack).

The communication model as described by Shannon and Weaver was later developed by Wilbur Schramm which included a "Frame of Reference" or "field of experience" which made reference to a common field of experience between the sender and the recipient of the message. Schramm's communication model, which was completed by 1971 took into account the impact that an individual's experience and culture had on their communication. It also stated that the sender's and receiver's common experience need to overlap to create shared meaning (Blythe). Without this shared meaning, there is bound to be a lack of understanding between the sender and the receiver.

An Example of the Communication Process

There is an excellent example of the communication process in the play *The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson which chronicles the story of a young woman Helen Keller, who lost her sight and hearing at a young age. Her teacher Annie Sullivan is trying to teach her sign language. The scene I am discussing takes place outside at a water pump where Annie is trying to get Helen to fill a water pitcher while signing into her hand the sign language formations of the word water. Helen had learned a few words as a young child, water being one of them as well as mother and father before she lost her senses to a febrile illness at 19 months; scarlet fever, rubella or encephalitis. She had even begun to speak and had learned the word *water*, which she pronounced "wa-wa" (Gilsdorf).

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has an “Ah ha” moment. She realizes that the symbols her teacher is signing into her hand represent the word “water” which she had learned long ago.” The two have a moment of *shared experience* as described in the Schramm model of communication. Helen also made the larger connection that things in the world have a name and she immediately wanted to know the name for everything in her immediate environment. Her teacher realized the connections Helen has made and yelled to her family inside their home “she knows!” This moving drama and excellent example of the communication model is dramatized in [this famous scene from the movie adaption of *The Miracle Worker*](#) (1962) played by the actors Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke.

Public Speaking in a Global Context

by Professor Valerie Small, Ph.D.

In the context of our ever-changing national and international demographics, public speaking is even more important. In 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau released a report indicating that the national head-count shows a more diverse nation than previously perceived. The report revealed that nearly four of ten Americans identify with a race or ethnic group other than White and suggested that the 2010 to 2020 decade was the first in the nation’s history in which the White population declined in numbers.

When presenting specifically to an American audience, one should know the cultural composition of the audience to avoid any conflicts and cultural offenses that might arise from unawareness. In addition to reviewing the [chapter on audience analysis](#) in this book, here are a few suggestions for preparing for your speech.

- Meanings are attached to nonverbal communication, e.g., facial

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- Remember that the United States is a “global village” and according to William Frey’s analysis of the U.S. Census 2020 report, nearly 40% of the population belongs to a racial or ethnic minority group. Therefore, the paramount concern should be to treat the audience with dignity and act with integrity.
- “People in every culture possess values related to their personal relationships, religion, occupation, and so forth. Understanding these values can help you deliver your message sensitively.”
- Use language that is understandable, appropriate, and unbiased towards the audience. For example, classmates and other audiences may speak in an ethnic vernacular, such as “Spanglish”, the combination of English and Spanish. Other vernaculars may reflect where they live and use regionalisms or words and phrases that are used in a specific part of a country; and finally, some may use jargon, the specialized language of a profession or hobby.
- Exhibiting cultural sensitivity also means acknowledging the offenses that can transpire when ethnocentrism occurs. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one’s own group or culture is superior to all other groups or cultures (Lucas 2015, 24). This superiority stems from one’s partiality to his or her cultural background.

In summary, it is crucial that one understands the communication process and how people interpret events, language, and texts differently. This depends on one’s frame of reference, which is guided by personal attitudes, beliefs, culture, values and so forth. Cultural differences, both within American subcultures and across international lines, affect all of our efforts to communicate in the classroom and in the community, and we need to make strenuous and sincere efforts to bridge cultural divides and emphasize what we will all have in common.”

You will find yourself in numerous circumstances in your community, work, and personal lives which will call upon your communication skills and ability to speak in public. Any job interview requires you to present yourself and speak about your experience in a pressured situation. As previously stated, you are not alone if the idea or act of speaking in public is challenging to you. Political candidates and community leaders all need to earn the trust of their audience and colleagues through sharing their ideas and personalities with them.

It is critical that you have a good understanding of the complex process of communication in order to be an effective speaker. You also need to be able to read the responses of your audience and use the information you receive to inform the delivery of your presentation. Remember, communication is a dynamic process. It is never one way.

You have also learned tools to handle the “excitement” that may arise as you present. Remember to use good support as you breathe and focus on the successful outcome of your presentation. Be sure to practice and prepare for your presentations. The better prepared you are, the more successful the outcome of your presentations will be.

You can be sure that the energy you put into improving your presentation and communication skills will be of great use to you in your professional and personal lives. The need to communicate effectively with a diverse global community is as important today as it was in ancient times. Although it may seem that the art of oration is not necessary in this day and age of digital communication it is as necessary as ever. Each of us has a unique contribution to make to our complex society. Your voice is needed to help address the critical issues facing our world today. Be sure that it is received as you want it to be, and don't let any fear of presenting in public lessen it. You have the ability to gain the tools and knowledge to make sure you are fully seen and heard in all areas of your life!

Review Questions

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2. How has the move to online communication impacted people's communication skills?
3. In addition to making an effective presentation and speaking well, what activity must the speaker engage in to engage with and maintain the interest of their audience?
4. What action from the Schramm model of the communication process was Helen Keller's teacher engaging in when she was forming sign language symbols into Helen's hands at the water pump?
5. Name five personal benefits you will gain from taking a Public Speaking course
6. What is ethnocentrism and how can a speaker avoid having an ethnocentric attitude?

Class Activities

- Give an example of the communication model and discuss all of its components in your discussion of it.
- Explain to a group of classmates how to take a deep, diaphragm supported breath.
- Describe a speech situation that would most likely have an engaged audience.

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