

## Rethinking the Public Speaking Classroom

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*On July 28, 2018, at roughly 7:00 PM, I received a series of panicked texts from my sister in California. My sister and her partner were in hiding as the police searched the town following a mass shooting in the neighboring town of Gilroy, California during their pinnacle Garlic Festival. The shooter had fled into Morgan Hill (where my sister sat, lights off, in a house with too many windows) and was apprehended a few hours later. His social media mere days before his killing spree spoke of ridding the Bay Area of “hordes of mestizos.” His anger, his bullets, were meant for my brown-skinned sister, who had made a coin-flip decision to not attend the festival that day. They were meant for my family.*

*They were meant for me. My people. My community.*

*Today, a group that spits the same hate, the same xenophobia that charged that shooter that night, is here. They’ve been given space to spread this hatred. Turning Point USA and Charlie Kirk spit hatred and xenophobia. Don’t listen to them, don’t give them space, and make it known to UNR that this is not a community that agrees or tolerate their hate. For my family, and for every life their hatred has cost.*



I’ve had the above speech draft socked away in a folder for three years. These words were meant to be presented at the *Resist Hate* rally at the University of Nevada, Reno in October 2019. Charlie Kirk, leader of the right-wing propaganda group Turning Point USA, spoke on campus that day. To bring an anti-immigrant, pro-gun speaker to campus, near where the Gilroy shooter had crossed state lines to purchase his AK-47, made me furious. I wanted, no, *needed* to speak against the violence they brought, and volunteered to present at the counter

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demonstration. I felt confident, as a student of communication and a teacher of public speaking, that I could stand in the face of fascism and speak confidently in resistance.

But in the moment, none of that mattered. I felt the fear of that night over again, and in a moment where I hoped to teach, I was overwhelmed. Instead of being able to share the pain, I collapsed in it, choking out a minute of words that were barely intelligible. The shame I felt was profound – why, an *instructor* in public speaking, was I not able to follow through? After years of public speaking in corporate and academic environments, and several years of teaching students to do so, I had found myself incapable of speaking against hatred, of speaking out against the manifestation of an evil that had hurt the people that I love. As I continued from my M.A. into a PhD, this lingered with me, particularly as COVID-19 left me and many of my students stunned at the sheer level of vitriol and callousness projected towards the most vulnerable people in our society. As Communication scholars, our commitment to resisting fascism must extend to the fundamental courses that we offer our students, something that I believe our current curricula of “public speaking” woefully fails to do. This piece considers two practical meditations that may help us develop the public speaking classroom into a place of transformative rhetorical praxis.

### **Commitment to Co-Intend Communicative Reality**

The public speaking curriculum generally revolves around a series of “templated” speeches. Students learn how to give informative and persuasive speeches and may also learn aspects of formalized debate during the semester. They are expected to cram their remarks into what we consider “good” speech habits, and deviation from those hegemonic speaking ideals are met with grade penalties. While the world of Communication research acknowledges the power and efficacy of hundreds of different rhetorical styles and strategies, we only reward students for engaging a fraction of them.

What this does is equip our students to answer to narrow, constructed audiences – the classroom or the corporate presentation. The hydras of fascist, supremacist, and colonial logics do not answer to the Monroe’s Motivated Sequence or the Four Step Refutation. In their place, I submit that public speaking pedagogy

needs to move towards what Paulo Freire calls “co-intentional education,” where the students and instructor engage in the discovery, critique, and re-creation of reality (Freire, 2000, p. 69). In this way, the public “speaking” course might become the course on public “engagement.” The early weeks of the semester would overview a variety of rhetorical forms, exploring the performance, the artistic, the embodied rhetoric of protest, the power of fugitive silence—and encourage students to investigate these avenues alongside us. The classroom becomes a place for instructors and students to practice and experiment with the universe of rhetorical styles, and the latter half of the semester might afford them a chance to collaborate and practice these rhetorical styles. Building on the critical interventions of Communication scholars before me, I dream of radical possibilities. What might an emancipatory future classroom look like if we encouraged our students to *practice their public engagement* by joining and/or organizing a protest, and/or staging a teach-in, and/or developing a political manifesto daring to demand social change, to create students that dare to “imagine otherwise” (LeMaster et al., 2022)? What would it mean to allow our students to write and speak in non-English languages, or to not speak at all (Chawla & Rodriguez, 2011; Hao, 2011)?

For instructors, this may seem a daunting reconfiguration of our job in the classroom. As co-intenders, our role is not to hold the objective formats of public engagement. I dream of a classroom where students rejoice and commune in the variety of expressions they have discovered. As instructors, we are there to guide, refine, and co-intend liberatory expression with them. Perhaps then, we might equip students with the confidence to proclaim truth to power, and to have colleagues around them that celebrate and encourage their liberation. For those that may object to this radical reshaping, I ask this question – what is the objective of this foundational classroom? Are we content to produce students only capable of speaking off a PowerPoint in 5-minute formats? Instead, what if Communication departments presented these departures to stakeholders as an updated toolbox, providing students the communicative skills to tackle a dynamic, modern society.

### **Recognitions of the Limitations of the World Rather Than Personal Failures**

In committing to this radical reconsideration of our public engagement course, we must also acknowledge that our understanding of “failure,” and the positioning of our classrooms to the larger world, should also be critically examined. We live in

a world marked by increased fascistic oppression and hostility. Our students of color cannot feel safe in a classroom when white supremacists pepper their neighborhoods and campuses with flyers calling for their death, and our immigrant students will never feel safe when fascist politicians are welcomed into the same building that they come to class for (Reginald Hardwick, 2021; “University of Illinois Students Walk out to Protest Jeff Sessions,” 2022). Just the same, Indigenous students cannot be expected to feel safe learning in a settler institution on stolen land. As instructors, we must acknowledge and accommodate for the violent, oppressive world that our students enter our classrooms from.

I contend that we need commit to ourselves and our students a radical re-understanding of failure. We have an obligation to recognize that asking for productive discussion or engagement is sometimes an impossible task for students already stretched beyond their limits by the oppression and violence they experience daily. COVID-19 showed us how constant death and fascist callousness could drain the ability to be academically engaged in the era of blank Zoom screens. Rather than be frustrated at this, I believe that we should embrace this exhaustion, and accept that “failure” is quite often the result of us and our students actively engaging in resistance to hegemonic oppression in our day to day (Fassett & Warren, 2004). The public engagement classroom is not a place “safe” from the “outside” world, but one that acknowledges and engages failure as a byproduct of a violent hegemony that organizes culture in and beyond our classrooms. We commit to our students being their whole selves, even if that means “failing” to meet our outcomes. As someone who was trained to leave my problems behind while teaching, I also commit to admitting exhaustion to my students, to throw away the pretense of invulnerability. In our new co-intending practice, we embrace failure and fatigue as preconditions of a fascist world.

### **Closing Thought**

I make no claims to these two meditative commitments being comprehensive, or even addressing every public speaking environment. However, I do hope that these thoughts serve as the beginnings of further critical discussions about connecting the rich world of communication back to the basic courses that we offer within our departments. Let us commit, together, to reimagining the capacity of even our fundamentals courses to offer students the space and confidence to build

their own liberatory communicative practices. Hopefully, we can bring the rich theories of emancipatory communication to even the most fundamental of our classrooms.

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