Hello World, It’s Me: Bringing the Basic Speech Communication Course into the Digital Age

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Courses: Introductory Public Speaking, Organizational Communication.

Objectives: Students will be able to speak comfortably and effectively when introducing themselves on video and utilize new digital media technologies when creating an introductory speech video.

Rationale

During the past decade, instructors of speech communication have been adapting the introductory speech course to keep up with the television age. Learning units in speech textbooks now teach how to speak well on television, as well as how to interpret speeches in the media. For example, Brydon and Scott (2007) note that “At one time, appearing on TV was a rare event, reserved for newsmakers and icons in the popular culture. Today, appearing on TV is not just common; many people are required to appear on TV as a result of their job or their role in their community” (pp. 444–445). Other leading basic speech communication textbook authors, including Gamble and Gamble (2008 with their textbook Communication Works), also recognize the role of the media and Internet in teaching speech. This article argues that the computer age invites adaptation of the introductory speech course because of the proliferation of online communication in the form of Facebook, YouTube, Skype, and other communication platforms.

In addition to cultural forces driving the use of emerging technologies, career services professionals and employers note that digital communication skills are imperative in today’s competitive job market. In fact, the future of college recruiting is changing through social networking and online communication mediums such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube (NACE, September 2009). According to

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the NACE Job Outlook 2010 report, approximately 47% of employer respondents expect to increase or continue the use of social networking websites in recruiting recent college graduates (NACE, November 2009). With the increased use of online communication among employers, it is not surprising that students will need to practice and fine-tune their online presence. Students will need to be educated and supported in developing appropriate communication skills through emerging online mediums if they are to be considered likely job candidates upon graduation. Video interviewing and participation in virtual career fairs are two current recruitment trends that are likely to continue (NACE, September 2009). Through online platforms such as YouTube, students are able to become more professional in online communication. Not only can students view how they may come across to potential employers or others who watch them, but they will learn which communication skills need improvement.

The gaze in the world of communication and performance is simply, yet complexly, the way in which we perceive things around us. This gaze is not just perception alone, but in combination with our culture, which makes us who we each are. Through our eyes, we have a bias to see things in our own way. Gamble and Gamble (2008) call this the “eye” versus the “I.” When a student gives a classic-style speech in front of the classroom, the experience is very helpful in becoming a better public speaker, but one cannot actually see him or herself give it unless it is recorded on video. Through this, the student can view his or her own speech with his or her own gaze. In its truest form, the student can get an authentic and unchanged performance of his or her speech. This is especially useful when students are trying to see themselves as future employers do.

Furthermore, Lippincott (2007) states there is an increasing need for higher education “to prepare students to be content creators within their disciplinary or professional specialties” (p. 16). Students will need to gain an array of technological skills to allow them to become “digital authors” of multimedia work in respective disciplines (p. 16). The digitally recorded speech of self-assignment empowers students to learn and use emerging digital technologies and incorporate these technological skills in a communications course that has traditionally focused on face-to-face speeches and video recordings provided by the instructor. Learning these technological skills will ultimately help to increase a student’s employability after graduation.

When Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy for the United States presidency in January 2007, she did so over the Internet. Seated comfortably on a sofa in her well-appointed living room, Hillary Clinton’s announcement for presidency personified the feminist credo, “the personal is political.” Seeing a politician in a personal environment is not unusual. Increasingly, politicians have become more familiar to us by appearing on late night comedy programs and talk shows. The Internet as a forum for the announcement makes sense in this political age, and Friedman (1999) has noted that the interest is “pervasive, unavoidable and indispensable.” By making an Internet announcement, Hillary Clinton attempted to capture the youthful demographic more likely to log onto their computers rather than turn on their
televisions. She never gave the traditional speech of announcement so common for political candidates that placed her in front of a flag on the Capitol steps. Instead, she relied solely on this brief, less than two-minute Internet announcement to get her message to the masses. Hillary Clinton’s use of the Internet was a politically savvy move, since the trend in political speeches is toward utilizing Web 2.0 technologies.

Incorporating the digital speech of self in a communication course enables students to see the importance of a professional digital presence and to start practicing early. Simply put: to be competitive, students must hone their digital communication skills, as well as their media skills. This article describes a digitally recorded speech of self that has been added to the basic speech communication course at The Pennsylvania State University, Lehigh Valley campus.

Assignment

To keep students apace with the pervasive, emerging Internet technologies, this assignment was created for the basic speech communication course. Students create a brief one to two minute digital speech of self as the first oral communication assignment of the semester. One class is dedicated to an introduction of the Media Commons, a university service that assists students and faculty in creating digital media and content for courses. Students receive a demonstration on how to use the flip HD mini digital camcorders, known more commonly as “flip cameras.” Students are encouraged to work in pairs, and each person digitally records the other with the flip camera. The Media Commons loans out the flip cameras and tripods for use on campus or at an offsite location. The Media Commons staff also provides training to students in editing, formatting, and uploading the videos. Students are walked through the process step by step. All self-introductions are posted on YouTube and then viewed in class.

Guidelines for possible material for introductions include: How long have you lived in Pennsylvania/the United States? Where are you from originally? What kind of person are you? What are your future career goals? What are you interested in majoring in? What are some things or activities you like? Students may use note cards and are encouraged to practice several times before hitting the record button.

Students must also watch at least four classmates’ digital self-introductions and comment on the videos using the online course management discussion board, which is moderated by the instructor. The rubric developed for instructor and peer feedback is on a 15-point scale and includes the following components worth two points each: staying within a one to two minute time limit, good production quality, telling a compelling story, speaking clearly, maintaining eye contact, and organizing the speech for the most impact. Three points were awarded for appearing relaxed and confident. This assignment: (1) gives students the chance to practice and hone their digital media and communication skills; (2) helps students to get to know other classmates; and (3) gives students the opportunity to begin to develop a professional online presence.
Consequently, by requiring students to post speeches on social media sites like YouTube, there are some ethical and privacy considerations. Lippincott (2007) discusses the importance of students learning to use information technologies in a responsible and ethical manner with the guidance of faculty, staff, and IT professionals. YouTube currently has three privacy settings: public, private, and unlisted. When “private” is selected, the video is assigned a separate URL and can only be viewed up to 25 times before it becomes inactive. If a student selects “unlisted,” the URL doesn’t come up in a search and anyone who wants to view the video needs to know the exact URL. Alternative options include using a university iTunesU account to upload and share private videos that will be protected behind firewalls or recording the video on a flip camera and then simply burning it to a CD.

Assessment

The digital age invites students to consider how they communicate on camera. Being effective on camera is imperative for students to find success in job interviewing settings, on the job for meetings, and certainly if they seek public office. This assignment awakens students to the needs of effective online communication and begins to strengthen their digital media and communication skills. Observations after this assignment showed that students continued to utilize the Media Commons and digital media skills they learned, although optional, for additional speech communication assignments. In the future, it is recommended that a pre- and post-survey is developed to assess knowledge of and interest in digital media and creation skills before and after the assignment.

References and Suggested Readings


